

## 29 Neibolt Street by lemonadeandrice

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**Summary:** The Losers Club have all grown up, and are living together until the next chapter of their lives. A Modern!College!AU

## **1. Chapter 1: Stanley Uris Takes a Bath**

From the street, the house looked significantly worn down, shutters and roof tiles knocked sideways from years of heavy rain and winds. The front door was painted a deep muddy red, lacquer peeling at the edges of the knocker. The portico leaned a little on one side over the porch and the soggy wooden steps sagged in the center. Two windows, like grime-filmed eyes, peeked over the portico. There was a rounded corner on stage left of the house, much like a tower, the siding of which had chipped away in some places. The house at 29 Neibolt Street was definitely in need of some TLC.

Richie Tozier's rusted 1997 Ford pickup truck grumbled up to the curb outside, Nirvana blasting out the rolled down window. Eddie Kaspbrak, mop of brown curls fluttering in the breeze, leaned out until his chest rested on the sill. He chewed the inside of his cheek, then turned to look at Richie.

Richie, five foot eleven and so lanky it looked as though he had folded his arms up nine times to fit them over the steering wheel, was squinting up at the house through the windshield, dark eyes behind thick-rimmed glasses.

"What do you think?" Eddie asked, looking back at the house. It gave off a serious air of "haunted".

Behind him, Richie shrugged, looking in the rear view mirror. "I dunno, Bill looked at it. He said it's okay on the inside. Tons of bedrooms. At least two bathrooms probably."

"It must be bigger on the back then." Eddie pulled himself back inside the car, smoothing the front of his green polo shirt.

Richie and Eddie had been friends since elementary school, and their friendship had bloomed as they grew, now both 23 - Eddie was two months younger, but the only person to point that out was Richie himself. Their friendship had been through a lot, what with all of childhood and puberty behind them, they had seen the absolute best and worst of each other. Richie's absentee parents, Eddie's overbearing mother, broken arms, blackened eyes, screaming at one

another at 2:15 am in the middle of Jackson Street when Eddie came out to the others first, because, "How could you not tell me, Eds? I'm your best friend!" and "Jesus Rich are you goddamn blind?" but ending with, "I fucking love you, 'kay? And if you ever wanna practice blowjo-" and "Beep beep, Richie."

Eddie had just graduated college from the University of Maine with a degree in health and recreation and Richie was taking classes through Penobscot County Community College. When Bill approached them with the idea to shack up with the rest of the Losers at this, "Great place, on Neibolt, p-p-shit-past the trailer park?" they had practically snatched the offer before Bill could finish. Richie could finally move out of Donald Elbert's rundown shack of an apartment, where the carpet was not its original color from cigarette burns and overflowing beer and according to the thin waxy residue on the walls, meth had been smoked inside at some point. That wasn't Richie's scene; he just smoked yellow American Spirits. Eddie, in the same breath, would do ANYTHING not to have to move back in with his mother. He was sure if he looked at his phone right now, he would have at least six missed calls and 27 text messages asking where he was, was he okay, why wasn't he answering, Eddie, oh Eddie please call. His mother who, ever since he had broken his arm the summer he turned 11 and had revealed to her he knew his "medicine" was fake, was dictionary Munchausen by proxy to a fault. After he had come out to her, well, Beverly then Bill then Mike and Stan then Ben then Richie THEN her, she had all but cut him off from having a normal social life. Thank god for the acceptance letter from UMaine. He had gone, and flourished, by god. Parties, Alpha Gamma Rho, boys - heavens the boys - and a job at a coffee shop. He had made so many amazing friends, but none of them would ever replace the Losers.

Now they sat together in Richie's secondhand navy truck, waiting for them to arrive. Not far behind them, they could see Beverly's Jeep coming down the road. She and Ben had hitched a little U-Haul to it, which carried an odd assortment of boxes and pieces of furniture, some of which was theirs. The others would probably be riding along in the larger box truck Bill had rented with the couches and chairs, a small kitchen table and ramshackle mixing of chairs, more boxes, a poorly bubble-wrapped television courtesy of Richie, and a stack of mattresses.

"We're talking about the house, not your mom," Richie started.

"Beep beep, Rich." Eddie smiled at him. His teeth were stark whites against the deepening tan of his skin. The past four summers had been good to him.

A honk came from behind them and they turned in their seats to see Beverly Marsh waving at them. She killed the engine of the jeep and got out, heart shaped shades covering her baby blues. She was wearing shorts, cut off halfway down her thighs, scribbled on with multicolored sharpie, courtesy of all of the Losers and a quick signature on the right butt pocket from Emily Nokes from Tacocat. Her freckled shoulders were exposed to the sun, a sheer blue croptop pulled up over her belly button. She pulled a cigarette from behind her right ear and fished a lighter out of her pocket. Richie and Eddie got out of the truck, Richie following suit with the smoke and they exhaled together.

"How was the drive?" Eddie asked, crossing his arms over his chest. He held his breath whenever the breeze pushed the cigarette smoke in his direction. His asthma had died down - all in his head after all - but the smell sometimes made him sneeze.

Beverly exhaled and licked her bottom lip. "Not too terrible honestly, traffic was shit as I was leaving, but all in all, I got here in two hours flat." She kicked at a pebble with her stark black Converse.

"It's because you drive like an asshole." Richie laughed, flicking the condensing ash off the end of his cigarette. Beverly snorted and she adjusted the piercing through her septum.

"Shit you right bitch." She stuck her tongue out at him. He returned the gesture.

Eddie smiled. Two of his best friends were here, and soon, they would all be living together under one roof. He looked at Bev, then Richie. He had to squint because Richie's head was at the level of the sun from his own five foot four. Richie radiated happiness. Eddie had a feeling that he felt the same way about the housing situation, regardless of outward appearances.

Not far off, the sound of a motorcycle roared closer. Bev giggled and clapped her hands together, knocking the cherry out of her cigarette. "Oh my fucking god, wait till you see his new bike, okay? Fucking gorgeous."

She was referring, of course, to Ben Hanscom. The two had been an off and on thing since middle school, only because she had moved up to Portland to live with her aunt. She came back to her Losers every summer, and every summer, she and Ben had rekindled their tiny burning flame of a romance. Then when she came back the summer after sophomore year, she found Ben a completely changed man. He had slimmed down significantly, and shot up a whole foot, standing at six foot two now. He towered over her, but she loved it. She could not remember a time, really, that she had not loved him. Even when he was a chubby little boy she had loved him, he had treated her like a princess since day one. And now, officially together, their love was strong and passionate. They could often be found kissing, huffing and panting in hallways, sneaking away from parties to make love anywhere and everywhere, looping pinkies as they walked. But of course, they were madly in love.

Ben's Yamaha rolled around the jeep onto the opposite side of the road. He killed the engine and adjusted the lapel of his leather jacket. Bev looked excitedly at Richie and Eddie, who raised his eyebrows at her, and then bit her lip and ran to him. He pulled off his black helmet, and smoothed his hair. He had a thin graze of stubble across his jaw and his face lit up when he saw her. Before he could even dismount, she was kissing him, throwing her arms around his neck and tossing her smoke simultaneously. Richie looked at Eddie and winked. "We could be hot and heavy like that you know."

Eddie rolled his eyes. "Are we going for a 'beep' record today, Rich?" He pushed playfully at Richie's arm and blushed. Richie's arms were toned and gave little against his fingertips. For some reason touching Richie's skin made Eddie's fingers burn.

Ben had dug a hand in Beverly's short auburn hair, and she moaned against his mouth. His stubble bit at her skin but she liked it. He smiled into her teeth. "Baby, how I have missed you."

She giggled. "You know I love it when you call me baby like that,"

she placed another kiss on his mouth. "And you just saw me last weekend."

He smirked and looked up at the sky, a mock eye roll. "Too long. Five damn days. But now," he pulled her closer to him and she tossed her head back, giggling. "We get to live together. You ready for that?" He turned his head down a little so he could look up at her through thick eyelashes.

"As long as you can help me fix this place up. Look at it."

They turned and looked. Ben blew a long wind of air from between his teeth. He squinched his eyes at the awnings and his mind whirled around the dimensions of the turret. He was good with his hands, and with Mike's carpentry skills and Stan's attention to detail, they could probably straighten all of the leaning bits and pieces of the house. It was Victorian, and had at one point been painted what Ben thought was a light grey. It would be a great project, he thought.

"Oh, it's not so bad," he said, looking back at her. "A little bit of a fixer-upper." She smiled, and kissed him yet again as a U-Haul and a small silver Toyota pulled up behind her jeep. It was Bill, Stan, and Mike.

They killed the engines of their respective vehicles and each got out. Bill Denbrough tossed a wave, the keys of the U-Haul dangling from his fingers. He pushed them into his back pocket and turned to wait for Stan and Mike. The two came up and Bill slapped Mike on the back, laughing at something Richie, Eddie, Ben, and Bev could not hear. They approached, Stan and Mike jabbering on about their drive. Richie dropped his cigarette and squashed it under the heel of his combat boot, leaning against the tailgate of his truck.

"Jesus tits, kids, took ya long enough. I thought you had forgotten about us!" He said to them and Stan rolled his eyes, walking up to give Richie a hug.

"Trashmouth," he lamented. It had been nearly a year since they had seen each other, what with Stan Uris having been at University of Southern Maine in Portland studying environmental science and biology so that he could go on to get a Masters in Ornithology, which

he planned to go to Orono to get, and Richie was, well, here. They had been extremely close since elementary and it made Richie a little jealous that Beverly got to see Stan more than he did. But he was here now and they would be close like before.

Ben and Mike Hanlon clasped hands and pulled it into a hug. Mike was two inches shorter than Ben, but just as stacked. After working on his parents' farm for nearly half of his life and playing football in high school and throughout his time at Bowdoin College, he had put on some healthy weight. He was even starting to gain on Ben, perhaps. Beverly hugged Mike as well, placing a burgundy lipstick stain on his cheek. "Mike, beautiful, how have you been?" She asked, her smile pulling the corners of her eyes into three tiny wrinkles.

He pulled his arms over his head in a stretch and looked back at Stan, who was chatting with Bill, Richie, and Eddie. Turning back to Bev and Ben he sighed. "The drive was easy, it was trying to make library studies sound exciting to someone learning about the insides of birds."

Ben scoffed. "I'm sure it is exciting!"

Mike laughed in response as Ben finally dismounted the Yamaha. "I like it, okay? I get to look at books ninety percent of my day." They walked to join the rest of the group.

Bill smiled at Bev and Ben, their hands clasped together. He gave them both hugs, and Bev gave him a matching lip mark to Mike's on his cheek. Then Bill turned to the house.

"So, this is the place." He said. His stutter had completely disappeared - well, almost completely, occasionally he got caught on 'p's and 'b's. After the accident, the one where his brother was killed on impact as a drunk driver t-boned his family's car as they drove to see his grandparents, the stutter appeared. He had taken so many classes, seen so many speech therapists, and finally, one of them had worked. And he did pretty damn well now if he did say so himself.

He had missed his friends, it was that simple. And he had been riding his bike around town one day after visiting his parents when he had passed by this hunk of wood at 29 Neibolt Street, a wobbly tin sign

that read, 'For Rent' in the dying grass on the front lawn. He'd taken a flyer and read all the information. Six bedrooms, one of which had been used as an office for a long time apparently, four bathrooms, two on the first floor and two on the second, one of which was in the master bedroom, a large kitchen and adjoining dining room, a living room fading out of the foyer. There was also an unfinished basement with a washer dryer from the early years of the millennium. Bill knew he himself couldn't, wouldn't, shit - didn't - need a house with six bedrooms. But he did know six people who wouldn't mind having a house. Somewhere to call their own. Even if it was just until they got on to the next chapter of their lives.

Rent was \$3500, easily conceived between he and his friends, but honestly he didn't think they would really take him up on the chance. He knew without at least three of the others, it wouldn't work, but then what would he have done with the two extra bedrooms? They were spacious enough rooms, all of them, so he didn't need an office. He wanted them all there. To be as close as they were in the Barrens as kids. To go back to that.

He had called Ben first. He knew if Ben came Beverly would surely follow, but it had actually been Bev who said yes first. He had been on speakerphone and she was washing dishes in Ben's small apartment kitchen.

"Fuck yes!" She had shouted over the running water and Ben had laughed. "We will be there." He said.

Next he had called Richie. He knew Richie was living with the Elbert guy from school, and from what he knew of the Elbert guy, Rich needed somewhere better. Not that Richie didn't party - oh he could throw down with the best of them, sure. But Elbert was into too many shady things for Bill's liking. He wanted his friends safe. They'd dealt with enough shit as kids. Bev and Richie especially.

Richie had been with Eddie oddly enough; the two were apparently having a Game of Thrones marathon. Richie had husked into the phone, "Hang on a sec," and Bill heard him whisper to Eddie, "Do you wanna live with a bunch of fucking Losers?"

Eddie had said something along the lines of, "You fuckin' serious?"



and perhaps Richie had nodded because there was no audible answer. There was a long winded, "YEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSS!" as Eddie screamed his answer and Bill had his.

Then he called Mike, who was on lunch from the public library he worked at in Brunswick. "Do you want to live with me and the rest of the Losers in Derry?"

Mike made a choking sound, perhaps from his lunch, and took a moment to clear his throat. Bill let him. He knew what it was like to need a moment to collect your voice.

"Who all is coming?" He asked when he finally regained his breath.

Bill named off those who had said yes. "No Stan?" Mike asked.

"I just haven't called him yet." Bill replied.

There was a sigh on the other end. "Do you think he'll come too?"

Bill pondered it for a moment. He didn't know why not. Graduation was coming up - they were all going to watch Stan walk and then a few weeks after that go see Eddie do the same. Why wouldn't they? Stan said he wanted to take a year between his BA and his Masters and relax, maybe work some. Why wouldn't he relish in the chance to be with his friends again? Maybe for the last time before they all actually "grew up" and maybe Ben and Bev got married and Eddie met a nice guy and Richie joined a rock band or something. The last time before adult jobs and full responsibility. He shrugged to himself.

"Once a Loser, always a Loser." He finally said. It was just stupid, hopeful, wishful thinking.

That seemed to be answer enough for Mike, who agreed. He would see if he couldn't get a job at the Derry Public Library and try to be there before the school year was up.

Stan actually called Bill. "Mike called me," he explained, and before Bill could even respond or ask if that meant he would come too, Stan said, "My lease is up after graduation, I'll start packing."

And now they were all here. Standing in front of this thrown together

stack of beams and windows, and it was all theirs.

"Are we gonna die in there?" Richie asked as they all looked at the house. Three of them cocked their heads to glare at him. Eddie, who was standing next to him made a clicking sound in the back of his throat. "Christ Rich."

Bill just laughed. "Let's go inside."

They all grabbed some boxes from their vehicles and started towards the door. The grass on the sides of the cobbled path was a pale green that signified it was dying - an easy fix, Mike mentioned - but everyone was chattering with excitement. Eddie took the stairs carefully, a backpack tossed over one shoulder. Richie made a comment along the lines of, "Grandma get your ass into gear!", to which Eddie responded, "Shut the fuck up Richie I'm trying not to snap my fucking ankle," and Bill looked for the key for this particular lock. As they entered, there was a gasp from Beverly, a quick, "Shit," from Richie, Eddie coughed, and the others just looked around in awe.

Things were dusty, yes, but everything was still solid as the day it was built. How the outside could become so destroyed but the inside stay relatively decent was beyond them. "This place is definitely haunted." Eddie said, and this is when, if he had still been a kid, he would have used his inhaler.

"It's not haunted!" Beverly laughed.

"If you hear some ghosts fucking in the walls Eds, you just come hide under my covers. Granted I sleep naked -"

"Beep beep, Richie." They chorused.

He shrugged. "Dibs on the big room!" He said and began bounding up the stairs.

Ben threw his head back with laughter and started to chase Richie. "No way, I'm bunking with a girl!"

"And she'll kick your ass if you take that fucking room!" Beverly laughed, following suit.

Eddie rolled his eyes and chuckled, walking over to Stan, who had pulled out a list of all of the rooms and where everything should go. All of the bedrooms were upstairs, doors patterned down a long hallway. The master was at the end of the hall, and took up what they thought might be the entirety of the back of the house. There were three bedrooms on the left side of the hall and two on the other, the bathroom slab in the middle on the right.

Ben and Beverly indeed got the master bedroom, but of course it was taken with some loving threats on Bev's part towards Richie. He sighed and took the last bedroom on the left. Eddie took the first bedroom on the right, which came off the stairs almost immediately - while moving his boxes from Richie's truck upstairs, he walked right past it three times, missing the door while chattering on with Stan about groceries or Beverly about her new ear piercings, which he commented didn't look infected.

It took them a total of five hours, working together to bring in all of their things. Mike and Eddie made up a quick list of groceries to grab, with a few extra items thrown on the list in Richie's scrawling cursive - Eddie looked at the list and then to Richie, glaring in an exhausted way up at him, "Beep beep, Richard." to which Richie replied, "Please, call me Dick." - and they, along with Bill had left.

Richie went to fiddling with a set of speakers sat in front of the television, which they had set on the floor next to the fireplace to place above it later. Ben mentioned he was unsure if the heat from the potential fires was safe for the tv, hell, he was worried that the wall in front of the flue wouldn't be strong enough to hold the tv up. Richie told him he should be more adventurous. Beverly laughed and reminded him of all the adventures that ended with him breaking his nose or glasses. Then they all went to their new rooms, and sighed with relief. They were all home.

Later that night, a little past seven, Stan was the first to try out the shower in the upstairs bathroom. After they had unpacked the cars, gone to buy groceries, fought with Richie about why, no, he couldn't cut holes in the walls to place the speakers, and unpacked the essentials from their boxes, he had decided he would take a shower - no, a bath - to soak and let the day's moving stresses wash away.

At first Eddie was wary of having everyone's stuff in the shower at once because of the possibility of mold growing, but Bill and Mike ensured him if it was really that big of a deal, there were two perfectly good bathrooms downstairs. Richie said when he wasn't going to walk down stairs in the middle of the night to wash his hair so he would use the upstairs bathroom. Eddie gaped at him.

"You're just waking up at all hours of the night to wash your hair?"

Richie pulled a curl out between his index finger and thumb, letting it bounce back into place, watching it cross-eyed. "Absolutely, I never know when I need to re-grease this shit. Now I could just use -"

"You know, Rich," Eddie cut him off. "Do whatever you'd like."

Richie reached out and pinched Eddie's blushing cheek. "Goddamn you're cute. Cute, cute, cute!"

And that had been the end of that.

So, Stan went to take a bath. He pulled his shirt over his head, dirty blonde hair just as curly as Richie and Eddie's. How did three of them get such ridiculous curls? Mike was adamant that his hair could be stupid curly like that but he kept it in a tight fade along his scalp. Stan had told him no matter what his hair would look good, and they had both stared at the floor after that, cheeks burning.

He gathered up his towel, white with blue stripes and wrapped it around his naked waist. He had already carefully placed his toiletries in the hanging caddy which Eddie had set over the showerhead - some Old Spice body wash, a bottle of shampoo/conditioner combo that had been picked up so many times the label had rubbed off in some places, and a razor to shave his face. Stan was all about saving time and water. But tonight he would be just a little bit wasteful, so that he could ponder over the day's events. He opened his door to the bedroom, first on the left, and closed it silently behind him. He padded over to the bathroom, the warped hardwood floor cold under his feet. He could hear Eddie and Richie talking quickly just down the stairs, Mike occasionally laughing at what they were saying.

Mike's laughter made Stan's heart jump a little. When they had first

met 12 years ago, they had been almost closer than the others. Stan couldn't tell you why that was honestly. Then it was if one day he had woken up, met the other Losers in the Barrens and Mike had just been there. Their eyes locked, two sets of brown and his chest had filled with a buzzing he could only attribute to the rapidly beating wings of an *Archilochus colubris*. It was if with just a look, they said to each other, oh it's you, it's always been you.

They had stayed away for a few years, letting their feelings grow and bloom under summer suns and winter moons, until Mike turned 16, a mere ten days before Stan had, and they stayed behind at the quarry after the other Losers had headed home, a birthday celebration planned for that evening. They had sat, two teenagers, fiddling with the grass. Mike had squinted into the sun, the water from their swim drying on his dark skin.

"I think I love you, Stanley." His voice was quiet, but Stan heard him plain as day. His heart jumped into his throat and he smiled without thinking.

"You think?" Stan said coyly. They caught each other's eyes again, and it was Mike who shyly broke the stare.

He chuckled. "I think I have for a while..." he paused.

Stan instinctively reached his hand out and placed it over Mike's, intertwining their fingers. His skin was pale and milky in comparison to Mike's, but the colors contrasted in stark perfection.

"You should know I think I love you too." He said after a few moments.

"You think?" Mike said smartly, and they both laughed.

Stan's heart had been pounding now, a hammer against a tin roof, and he could feel Mike's under his fingers. "Now what?" He asked, his voice catching a little in his throat.

Mike had kissed him then. It was gentle and testing, Mike's top lip fitting neatly over Stan's lower one. It had been chaste and clean, and the whole night at the party, Stan could not pull his fingers from his

mouth, thinking over the static electricity that had resided there not hours before.

He initiated the next kiss as the party died down, Richie flopped drunkenly over the edge of the couch, muttering to Eddie about his shoes, his SHOES, Eddie! don't let Bev draw a dick on my face, leave my shoes on, Eddie fussing over him, laughing and threatening to untie the laces on his white checkerboard Converse. Bev wasn't even there, Stan knew, she and Ben had disappeared somewhere in the upstairs of Richie's parents' house hours ago. Bill had passed out, curled into a ball in the armchair.

This kiss had not been chaste or clean. Stan had followed Mike into the kitchen, carrying half a dozen empty bottles and cans to the trash can. Mike turned and leaned against the counter, smiling gently at him. Stan pondered his next move for a moment, then rushed at him, slamming his mouth full force into the other, their noses clashing against one another. Mike had laughed slyly, pushing his hands up into Stan's curly hair as Stan grinded his hips against Mike's jeans. They had moaned into open mouths, tongues pressing against one another, Mike tugged gently at his hair in order to expose his neck, where he placed a great many biting kisses. It had ended with Stanley, who would never admit it to any of the other Losers, but Mike knew, coming from the excitement in his pressed khakis. They were panting, pressing foreheads against each other, laughing and kissing and smiling.

They hadn't made love that night. That would come a few years down the line.

Stan locked the door behind him and folded his towel over the rusty towel rack and leaned to turn on the hot water. This was one of those situations where he had to think about the hot and cold water. There were two knobs, but the 'hot' and 'cold' labels had rubbed off long ago. He went for it, turning the left knob all the way over and then holding his hand under the water to see which way it would go. Miraculously, it warmed up rather quickly, and he stopped up the claw foot tub, its dragon foot legs a tarnished silver color. While the tub filled, he looked at himself in the mirror.

His jawline was a jutting angle, sharp and crisp like the lines of his

freckles nose. His hair folded and rippled in tiny wavy curls, springlike in their form. His eyes were brown, and red from having to squint at his phone while they drove, pointing aimlessly as he gave Mike the directions. His chest and shoulders were broad, a thin inkling of chest hair dappled above his nipples. He wasn't muscular in any sense that he could see, meaning he didn't have a six pack or anything, but he was toned and thin. Mike could fit his hands cleanly over each pectoral muscle, his touch always kind.

The tub filled rather quickly, steam rolling off the surface of the water. Tentatively, he stuck his foot into the water, hissing between his teeth as he entered the scalding water. He lowered himself into it, letting the heat soak into his skin. He rested his head on the backside of the tub, which was a good foot and half from the walls aside from where the showerhead was posted. He let his body be consumed by the water, lapping over his goosefleshed skin. He closed his eyes, long eyelashes licking the top of his cheeks.

After about twenty minutes, he heard some sort of scuffle from below and his eyes snapped open. He pulled himself up against the sides of the tub and listened, but the sound had ceased. He shrugged and turned to his toiletries.

The silver razor sat neatly next to his soaps and shampoos and he picked it up, studying its blades. There were five of them, each sharp and deadly, like teeth in the mouth of a rabid dog. He carefully placed his thumb over the top blade, and dragged it down, with the grain. Each tooth plucked at his flesh silently, and he wondered absentmindedly how girls could possibly shave their legs with this. He would have to ask Beverly sometime how often she cut herself.

From below again there was a slamming of doors and some sort of yelling - Richie probably- and Stan slid his thumb horizontally across one of the razor blades, slicing his skin open. He gasped and dropped the razor, nearly onto his leg, shoving the stuck thumb in his mouth to staunch the blood. Moments later came the steady bumping of bass from the speakers, something that sounded vaguely like 'Welcome to the Jungle' but Stan couldn't be for sure. He stood up quickly, holding his cut thumb out at an angle so as not to drip blood on anything - Eddie would throw a fit. He unstopped the tub and the water began to run down in the tendrils of a whirlpool. He yanked down his towel

and hastily wrapped it around his waist, pushing the hair away from his steamed face.

He opened the door, peeking his head out. It was definitely 'Welcome to the Jungle' blasting in the living room and rattling the rest of the house with its volume. He looked up and down the hallway, the cool air hitting his wet legs making him shiver. Moments later Beverly and Richie were coming up the stairs, Bev's hands squeezing the sides of Richie's face, he was making a kissy pout at her. They were laughing and it wasn't until they were practically on top of him that they saw Stan.

"Stan the Man!" Richie screeched. "The party has arrived and he is buck-ass naked!"

"Party?" Stan replied, ignoring the latter comment.

Bev nodded. "The housewarming party!"

"I didn't know we were having a party?" Stan said, blood dripping unceremoniously down his hand.

Richie scoffed. "You underestimate the power of Richard Tozier!" He said, and Stan could smell liquor on his breath. They had already started the party, apparently. "I called up everyone I know and some randos from the phone book and we are breaking this bitch in!" He held in his hand a semi-crushed can of Pabst and he sloshed it over the floor as he raised the hand to toast, emitting a whooping cry that echoed down the hallway.

Stan laughed and shook his head. Bev was just laughing and biting aimlessly on the end of a cigarette. She saw the blood on his hand and snatched it up, cooing.

"Your finger!" She said, his blood staining her own hands.

He gently pulled it away. "It's fine. Nothing Dr. Kaspbrak can't fix up if need be." He chuckled.

Eddie had always sort of been the doctor of the group, what with all the bells and whistles stashed away inside his fanny packs. He always seemed to be carrying around at least one roll of gauze, some medical



tape, tweezers, bandaids of varying sizes and patterns, ointments and sprays for all issues, and on one occasion, a small dropper vial of peroxide for particularly nasty scrapes. They had all grown quite accustomed to watching in awe as he would set Richie's nose or clean up scrapes on Bill's knees from falling off Silver. There had also been the time Henry Bowers, resident asshole of Derry, had carved the first letter of his name into the pale white baby skin of Ben's stomach. Ben, of course, had handled Eddie's careful hands with humility, except when Beverly had showed up of course. The cut had healed nicely, regardless of the three-sticked scar Ben now had to show for it.

Stan made a note to see if he couldn't steal a bandaid from Eddie's room before he joined the others downstairs.

"It looks owie." Richie belched. Beverly pushed him.

"You nasty bitch." She laughed at him, covering her mouth with her hand as she did so.

He snapped his teeth at her and made a low growling sound in his throat. "Girl you don't want to know nasty -"

"Beep beep, Richie." Stan said, shaking his head.

Richie shrugged and dragged Beverly along, perhaps in search of a lighter or more cigarettes. Stan watched them go down to Richie's room and fall through the door.

God how he loved them both.

He went into his room to throw some on clothes, pulling open a suitcase he had filled with neatly folded pants and polos.

If he was being honest with himself, he wanted to dress to impress Mike. Even now, nearly seven years later, he still wanted to give the man butterflies. Mike gave them to him - why shouldn't he return the favor?

He chose a pair of jeans, something he didn't wear often, but dressed it up by shrugging on a clean black button up, something no doubt Mike would have trouble unbuttoning later if he drank too much.

Stan wasn't sure how he should act around Mike now that they all lived together. It's not that they were ashamed of their relationship in any way, moreso that it wasn't particularly anyone's business but their own, not even their best friends. Stan was quiet when it came to this sort of stuff. He wasn't big on PDA and the most they did in public when they were out together was hold hands.

And it seemed like the house would be completely overrun with rainbow flags if they came out too - what with Eddie being, "The gayest gay who ever gayed sometimes." And Richie who was, as he so delicately put it, "A big fan of anything he can go in and around and upside down on." Whatever that meant in particular. Stan had watched him flit from relationship to relationship with people, regardless of gender for years, but he never stayed with anyone long.

There were so many facets to he and Mike's relationship that made the secrecy easy. For one, neither of them were out to their families, and it didn't seem strange when they hung out one on one because the other Losers did that too - Richie and Bev, Bill and Ben, Eddie and Mike. But perhaps it was time they let their relationship be out in the open, no pun intended.

Stan finished getting dressed, running a comb through his hair as best he could. With thick curls like his, it was tough to pull anything through it. Once in high school Beverly had tried to straighten his hair to see what he would look like "emo" and it ended up looking more crimped than anything else.

He brushed down the collar of his shirt and left his room. The music was bumping throughout the house, now 'Africa' by Toto playing. Richie must be in charge of the music, Stan thought.

He went across the hall to Eddie's room, his finger still bleeding in an oozing fashion. He knocked tentatively, but he wouldn't have been able to hear if Eddie said, "Come in!" with the music so loud. So he opened the door.

"Eddie?" He said, but no one was there. Eddie must be downstairs at the party already. He entered the room, looking around at all its contents and hoping the first aid kit was out in the open.

The room was messy, boxes still lying stacked on top of one another and the bed was hastily made. There was a desk placed against the south wall, a small reading lamp lit on it. The first aid kit, like a token, sat dead center. He trotted over to it, popping the lid open and rummaging through it to find what he was looking for.

In a small box were 15 Star Wars themed band-aids and he peeled one over his thumb. He tossed the paper into the wastebasket to the right and dusted his pants off, a notebook catching his eye. It was opened about halfway through, Eddie's small cubic handwriting covering three fourths of the page.

Stan squinted at it, being nosy clearly, but he couldn't help himself.

"...and he's doing all the right things but Jesus Christ does he piss me off... I don't know what to do about it anymore...my heart hurts in so many ways..." it read.

Stanley looked away, embarrassed. He guessed it was Eddie's diary. He slowly backed away as if he had stumbled across an angry wild animal and crept back out into the hallway. He closed the door quietly behind him and then began down the stairs, running his hand along the splintered handrail for balance.

Downstairs in the living room had gathered fifteen or twenty people, but even as he entered the foyer, four more people came in the door. Stan recognized maybe three of them from high school but the rest were strangers. He panned the room for Mike, but couldn't see him over the crowd. He saw Richie, Eddie, and Beverly standing by a small table with a laptop on it and they were screaming at each other, pointing frantically at the screen and then making wild hand gestures at Richie, who had his hands out in front of him defensively. Stan walked over to join them.

"No one wants to listen to your "Masturbation Playlist", Richie!" Eddie cried, holding his hands to his head and laughing ridiculously.

"It's literally just sounds of your mom moaning on loop for seven hours! Who doesn't love that!" Richie retorted, scrolling down the long extensive list of music he had pulled up on the screen.

"You've got that Die Antwoord song here nine times, Rich. Jesus! We can only take so much South African rap." Beverly added.

"Oh because your music is so much better?" Richie snickered.

"We listen to the same shit, Richie!" She threw her hands up and saw Stan.

"Stanny you're here!" She exclaimed. He smiled and nodded.

"Eddie I stole a bandaid, hope that's ok."

Eddie screwed up his face a little. "What'd you do?"

Stan shrugged. "Cut my finger on a razor."

Eddie's eyes got wide. "Did you clean the wound? Because razors hold a lot of dead skin cells and you could really easily get an infec-"

"Relax Eds, he's not gonna die. Stan's got the immune system of a machine man." Richie said, tossing an arm around Eddie's shoulder. "A machine man? A robot dude!" He concluded, eyebrows raised.

"Richie you're getting too drunk too fast. And it's an android." Eddie said, not removing the arm.

"Richie has an iPhone..." Beverly said, confused.

"The word you're looking for is cyborg." Stan said, no one listening.

"I happen to be getting just the right amount of drunk in the right amount of time!" His shaggy haired friend replied.

Stan shook his head and looked around the room. Still no Mike, but Ben and Bill were posted up near the kitchen door talking to a girl with long straight auburn hair. She seemed really invested in whatever Bill was explaining to her, laughing and putting a hand on his arm. He had a beer in his opposite hand and sipped from it nervously.

"Who's that Bill's talking to?" Stan asked.

Beverly waved her hand, returning her eyes to the computer again. "Audra something. Flag's cousin. Came with him from Portland."

Stan nodded. Gay or not, he could recognize that she was cute. Maybe Bill had a shot. He deserved that.

"Where's Mike?" Stan asked, looking at the three of them out of the corner of his eye. Eddie was smiling awkwardly at the ground, Richie's arm still wrapped around his narrow shoulders. Richie had placed his chin on top of Eddie's head and was yammering on to him about the sustainability of a party if Backstreet Boys started playing. Beverly looked up.

"Last I saw he was in the kitchen," she slurred, pointing over towards Bill and Ben. Stan nodded and headed that direction.

Bill and Ben greeted him warmly. "Stan you made it!" Ben joked, slapping him on the shoulder.

"I know, it was such a long trek I didn't think I'd make it on time." Stan replied sarcastically.

"Stan this is Audra Phillips," Bill said. "Audra, this is Stan Uris, one of the roommates." The two shook hands and she smiled brightly, all teeth shining white.

"This place is great!" She said, looking up at Bill. He had been staring at her and looked away quickly, blushing.

"Stan you need a drink?" Ben asked, gesturing at his empty hands.

"Yeah, I was looking for Mike, too." He hoped that didn't sound suspicious, but he pushed the worry away.

"Yeah," Ben nodded through the doorway. "He's in there making mixed drinks of some sort for some sorority types."

Stan nodded a thanks and pardoned himself through the entry.

Indeed Mike was at the small island in the center of the kitchen, five plastic cups in front of him as well as an array of liquor bottles. He was surrounded by four girls, all varying degrees of blonde, mostly

tall - Stan noticed they were all wearing heels - and watching Mike in amazement as he threw some ice cubes in the cups. When Stan entered, the smile on his face grew ten times. Stan's cheeks burned and he bit his lip.

"Hey! Where've you been?" Mike asked, the girls all turning to look at Stan. Two of them fluttered their eyelashes and he grinned.

"Upstairs, I didn't realize we were bumping tonight." He said.

Mike shrugged. "Count on Rich to attempt a rager our first night." Stan came up and leaned against the island, his hands curling over the marble countertop.

"Ladies, this is Stan. Stan, this is Christine, Danielle, Fran, and Annie." Mike pointed down the line, each of the girls smiling wildly at Stan. He nodded a hello. It had been Christine and Fran who had given him the eyes and for a moment he pitied them. He only had eyes for the tall dark-skinned boy across from him.

"What are we drinking?" He asked, raising his eyebrows at them.

"Not sure yet, still testing the waters." Mike said. "I don't think they can handle all this." He waved his hands over the bottles. Jack, Jim, Crown, Captain, and a small plastic bottle of Fireball. He had arranged some cans of Coke and Diet Sprite next to the cups as well, the tabs cracked on at least two of them.

"We can handle anything you give us." One of the girls said, and Stan rolled his eyes.

"Pick your poison." Mike said, winking at him. The girls, chattering at Annie, who had made the comment, didn't notice. But he had, just as Mike wanted. He shifted nervously in his jeans, his ears ringing. God even just looking at him made his mind race.

Mike licked his lips and he started picking up bottles, pouring them haphazardly into the cups. Stan watched his hands as he did so. Strong hands, calloused from years of backbreaking farm work, hoeing and tilling and working with livestock. Hands that squeezed Stan's own tentatively whenever something scary happened in a

movie they were watching. Hands that pulled his hair just enough to emit a small squeak of pleasure from deep in his chest. Hands that knew which ribs to touch gingerly, to make him gasp as he rode him. Hands that ran through his hair as his head rested in his lap, watching the Poecile atricapillus and Uria lomvia as they traveled south. Hands that held his face and wiped away tears when his grandmother died, non-Hodgkins lymphoma. These were hands Stanley knew well, and they were only a piece of the man he was so deeply in love with that his chest hurt.

He had been so lost in the way Mike's knuckles bent and moved that he hadn't seen everything that went to the cup, which Mike was now pushing towards him. "That will help with the sobriety." The six of them raised the cups in a mock cheers.

"What are toasting to?" Fran asked.

Mike and Stan locked eyes. Stan shrugged. "To the Agapornis personata." He said.

The girls attempted to repeat, "Aga...por-iss uh...personada..." not even knowing what it meant. But Mike did. And he was so glad he did.

They slammed the cups down on the counter and slammed them back. The combination of liquids burned his throat - there was definitely Fireball in there - and when it was all the way down he coughed dryly. The girls coughed too and only one of them grimaced in disgust.

From the living room, "Rock Lobster" by the B-52s came on. They heard Beverly roar, "Richie no!" followed by Richie screaming, "Richie yes!" There were a few seconds of the music jumping from one song back to "Rock Lobster" then to another then back again. The music landed on something sexy and the fighting was done, Beverly had won.

Annie grabbed Mike by the hand, pulling him out of the kitchen into the living room, perhaps to dance. He went hesitantly, throwing Stan a look as he did, and they touched fingertips as he passed. A delicate strike of lightening filled up his stomach. One of the other girls, he

believed it was Christine, took his hand, her own soft in his. It was weird and unnatural, not the hand he wanted to hold.

The shot made his head burn, a shrill buzzing filling his ears. The music was in Bev's hands now, Ben standing behind her, whispering in her ear as she giggled. Richie and Eddie had fallen into the couch, and they were speaking very closely, drinks in hand. Well, Richie was speaking closely, his mouth practically grazing Eddie's own. Eddie was laughing and smiling, nodding at whatever it was that Richie was saying. Stan noticed one of Eddie's legs was tucked lazily over Richie's, Richie's hand on his knee. Bill was still talking to Audra, but they had moved to the window, Bill leaning on the sill and she was talking, using her hands to emphasize. Bill was just staring at her, like he was counting all of the freckles on her nose, his face a bright crimson.

Christine turned her back to him, the lyrics of whatever "club" music Bev had put on blurring together. Stan moved with her awkward grinding, if you could call it that, but he was watching Mike.

Annie wasn't dancing with her back to him. She had picked up a beer somewhere in the brief walk and held it daintily in the hand she had slung over Mike's shoulder. He was indulging her, sure, but not too much. He glanced up at Stan and gave him a wicked little grin, giving him a thumbs up as well. Stan rolled his eyes. Beautiful, smartass man.

Mike said something to Annie, who pouted at him and said something back, none of which Stan could hear with the speakers so close. Mike pulled the corner of his mouth up in a sort of, "sorry" look, and walked past her. He came up to Stan and Christine, who stopped dancing.

"Want to help me grab some beers?" He asked, hoping Christine wouldn't take that as an invitation to join them.

Stan bit his lip and nodded, giving Christine a quick and informal goodbye and followed Mike back towards the kitchen.

It was empty, but they didn't stop. Out of sight, Mike grabbed his hand, electricity shooting up through his arm. That feeling, oh god



that feeling. He followed him into the hallway that led toward the backdoor and the basement, taking the door outside.

It was cooler than inside, the summer air sweet and thick with humidity. The backyard was fenced in with a rickety wooden privacy fence and there were three birch trees on the far end of the yard. Mike looked at Stan, his breath hard. "I've missed you," he said, standing under the porch light, his hand still wrapped tightly around the other.

Stan took the lead now, running Mike to the standing of trees until they were partially hidden behind the trunk of one.

"I've missed you too. Now fucking kiss me." He said. Mike laughed quietly and did. It was a hard kiss, pushing and frantic. Stan's hands cupped around his neck, pulling him deeper into the kiss. Mike's hands were pushing up under his shirt, his hands warm and rough against his skin. He gasped meekly. Mike carefully undid the top button of his shirt, and placed a kiss there.

"Christ," Stan let escape his mouth, which Mike closed off with his own, his tongue probing the inside of his cheek.

Suddenly, Stan was fumbling with the buckle of Mike's belt, his thin fingers frenzied as he tried. Mike looked down, panting and let him, one of his hands pulled up into his hair. He just wanted to touch him, to taste him, to make him feel as good as he did. To love him.

Mike leaned his forehead against Stan's chin, his back crushing into the tree. "Baby," he breathed.

Stan got the belt undone, quickly popping the button on his jeans, and sliding his hand into his pants, feeling him rock hard already. He moaned.

"Stan," Mike choked as he gripped his cock. He just wanted to make him feel good now. "Stan please."

Stan wasn't much of an outdoorsman. He didn't like to get dirty, especially if it meant ruining perfectly good clothes. But he dropped to his knees anyway.

Mike made a weak crying sound as Stan placed a kiss on the fabric of his boxers, soft and waiting. He looked up into Mike's shadowed face. He was breathing shallowly, his brow furrowed.

"I love you Mike." He said. It was the truth, the whole goddamned truth. He felt it in the pit of his stomach and in his chest every day.

Mike chuckled, a sound like he could cry at this perfectly fantastic situation. "I love you too."

Stan nodded, his heart beating so rapidly he could have passed out. He slowly tugged Mike's jeans down, enough so that he could pull his cock out easily, rubbing the shaft with the flat of his hand. Mike moaned and leaned his head back against the tree.

Stanley placed his tongue carefully on the underside of Mike's member, his mouth practically watering at the prospect. He looked up at this man through his eyelashes. Then, he slowly lowered himself over it, listening to the quick hiss he made in pleasure.

He kept time with the motions, up and down, running his tongue over the tip, Mike saying over and over again, "Fuck I love you I love you I love you so goddamn much oh my god I love you."

He could sense Mike was almost there, so close he could literally taste it, when music flooded the yard. Stan disconnected as he heard the back screen door slam into the wall of the house.

He tried to peek around the tree without being seen.

It was Richie and Beverly, smoke curling around their heads and Richie was hollering about something or another. He sighed.

"It's Rich and Bev." Mike was already buckling his pants back up, but slowly, watching him with a short smile on his mouth. Stan stood, looking up into curve of Mike's lips, dimpled cheeks, beautiful sweat-glistened skin.

He wiped the corners of his mouth, suddenly very shy. Mike pulled his chin towards him, and kissed his nose, then placed another smaller one on his lips.

"I am so in love with you that it's not even funny." Mike whispered. Stan leaned his head against his chest, stifling a breathy laugh into it.

"What?" Mike said.

Stan looked at the sky, the long finger-like branches of the birch blocking out most of the stars and part of the moon. How could this all be real?

"I am just stupid in love with you. So stupid that I have trouble believing I could get so lucky." He said, grinning.

They kissed again, a fire spreading across their skin, Mike taking his hand.

"I hope I can spend the rest of my life showing you how I'm the lucky one." Another soft, peppermint kiss. "And maybe, if you'll let me, I'll return the favor later tonight." Stan blushed, throwing a hand to his face. Mike laughed and peeked around the tree. Beverly and Richie were still there, Bev now laying flat out on the concrete patio. She was laughing so hard it sounded like she was choking.

Mike turned back to Stan and sighed. He placed a kiss on each knuckle of his left hand and then squeezed it.

"Until tonight," Stan said. "I love you."

"I love you." Mike replied, and he turned around the edge of the birch. Stan remained, leaning his back against the base of the tree. He heard Richie exclaim something when he saw Mike and waited to see if they would come over. They didn't, and a few moments later, the yard was filled with music again, and the three had gone inside.

Stan breathed a sigh of relief. His heartbeat had begun to slow, and all he could think was how much, just how goddamn much he loved Michael Hanlon.

## 2. Chapter 2: Ben Hanscom Takes a Drink

The first few weeks fell into a semi-regular routine rather quickly, all of the Losers having found their niche inside the house.

Eddie insisted on throwing together a shower schedule so that the hot water wouldn't run out for anyone at any point. Richie made a comment to Mike about how he was going to, "fuck the schedule hard, but tenderly," because he showered maybe once every three days at any and all hours of the day. Stan had awoken one night to get a glass of water and heard him singing/screaming, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" at 3:45 in the morning. He wasn't off key, however.

Eddie showered in the mornings, around 6:30 am, then Stan around 7:45 am. Bill and Bev were afternoon people, usually around noon and 2:30 pm. Ben and Mike were avid nighttime bathers, taking short yet thorough showers that left the mirrors unfogged and the walls practically dry. Whenever Richie took the time to actually shower, he would let his long thick hair drip in torrents over the floor, and in the morning, Eddie would scream 'Stella'-esque, "RICHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" as he nearly tumbled down on the slippery floor.

Stan and Mike thought it would be a nice idea if they all had breakfast or dinner together occasionally, but more often than not it was only dinner, what with Stan and Eddie usually being out of the house before 9 am, when Ben and Bill would be rousing. Beverly would usually sleep until 10:30 or 11, sometimes noon depending on how late she was out the night before.

She had got a job at a bar downtown, serving drinks to older rednecks and on Thursday nights, College Night, the bar would fill with a vast mixing of all of the twenty-somethings from Bangor and the surrounding areas.

Beverly was one of those types of beautiful that was almost ethereal, and she rolled in the tips because of it. But she also had her fair share of creeps, guys who would ask her what time she was off, did she have a boyfriend, was she looking for a good time. One night when Ben had dropped her off and come to pick her up around 2:30, a

drunk co-ed tried to follow her to the bike, and when he grabbed her arm, Ben had taken a quick step forward, but Bev had it handled. She rounded on the guy, hitting him so hard with a southpaw punch that he fell flat on his back and lay there for a few minutes. "If a girl tells you no, you fucking stop." She spat, standing over him. She and Ben had sex fast and loud that night.

Richie had an interesting sleep schedule, in that he never seemed to actually sleep. He could often be heard listening to music or playing video games at all hours day and night, and then he would take classes Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Yet he wouldn't stumble down for breakfast until nearly 11 am every day, looking hungover but without a headache. Most of the group pondered aloud if he was a vampire.

Dinners however, were definitely a family affair. Minus Thursdays, karaoke night at the bar, either Mike or Stan would cook, or they'd call for takeout. The second night they had all been there, after the housewarming party, Stan and Mike worked together to make up a three course meal, complete with a vegan chocolate and strawberry mousse. The strawberries had come picked special from Mike's family's farm, and apparently Stan was a master culinary artist and made the mousse from scratch. They had salads and pot roast, which Mike had let simmer in the crock pot for four hours along with some diced baby red potatoes, thyme, sage, a few cloves of garlic, and lemon juice. They also made up a vegan cheese quiche, since both Stan and Mike weren't huge fans of eating meat. It was probably the best meal any of them had had in years. Richie had wiped at his eye and said, "Goddamn this meal looks so good I could cry. It's like looking at Eds' mom's pus-" and Eddie had cut him off with a quick slap of the hand over his mouth.

Now it was just whatever they had time to make, or order. Chinese or pizza or Jimmy John's. Eddie had made goulash on one particularly rainy day and they had eaten the leftovers for five days after. Bev was a big fan of chili but she wanted to wait until football season started to show off her skills.

Most nights everyone was home at the same time and they even had a few days during the week where all of them were off, but that only happened once in a blue moon. Everyone had a job, Richie included,

and helped contribute to the bills. Turns out electricity and water for seven people can get up there in price.

Richie worked several jobs, jumping to and from the individual places - a Pizza Hut, a Target, a WalMart, a gas station, and briefly, he would tell them, as a nude model at the Arts Center of Derry.

Stan got a job at the modest zoo not far outside of town, really an animal rescue for wild animals of the area but he still loved it. He got to work with the birds who were in rehabilitation, three in total as of right now - a barred owl (*Strix varia*), a mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*), and a small orphaned glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellis*). He had named this particular one Icarus.

Ben was working with a construction crew as their assistant head architect; they were planning to build a new bank downtown and he had big plans for it. An entirely glass front with double paned windows, a ceiling twenty feet high with chandeliers, and perhaps even the vault on the lower level. It was his first real gig doing this sort of thing and he was so excited about it. When he landed the interview, he and Beverly planned his outfit for days, practicing what the interview might entail and revamped his resume until it glistened.

Bill was writing freelance for the Bangor Daily News. He had also picked up a job at the elementary School teaching summer classes as a substitute. The pay was modest but he brought in his share for bills. At \$25 a story he knew he wouldn't be able to add much, but he usually still had extra after putting his share for rent and the like in the crumpled manilla envelope on top of the fridge.

Eddie got a job at the pharmacy, taking and giving out prescriptions to the Derry citizens concerned about their health. Once or twice a week, a young man with frantic looking eyes would come in to pick up an asthma prescription or a menagerie of pills. Eddie had, terrified and nearly in tears, told Bill and Mike that it was like looking back in time and he just wanted to reach out and grab the kid's hand, tell him he would be okay.

Mike got the job at the Derry Public Library, though he admitted he spent more time reading the books than putting them back on the

shelf. He helped with the Kid's Corner, reading illustrated works to kids aged 2-5 every Tuesday and Thursday. Whenever he came home on these days, he would sweep Stanley up in his arms, away from the prying eyes of the others, and kiss him gently, whispering about he couldn't wait to have some of his own. Stan would blush and make a backhanded comment about a lack of uteri, but it didn't matter. His heart would swell.

On the first month anniversary of them all having lived there - Beverly wrote out the reminder in swooping letters on the calendar they posted on the front of the refrigerator - they decided to have a movie night and dinner to celebrate.

"Do we want to make a big fancy dinner?" Mike asked, rinsing a plate under scalding hot water and then handing it to Eddie, who was drying them as they went. Eddie sat the plate in the dish rack and turned, facing Bill and Beverly and Richie. Stan was on his way home from work and Ben was down at the bank, discussing security measures with the crew. Bill held a copy of the newspaper in front of him, a red felt-tipped pen in hand, circling errors as he found them. He drew a loop around a spelling error on an ad for the circus - featuring Pennywise the DancERing Clown - and capped the pen. He looked up and shrugged.

"Do we have time for it? I know I work in the morning on Friday." He said.

Mike wiped his hands on a towel and tossed it on the counter. "I'm off and so is Stan, so we can start cooking that afternoon if you want. What movies do we want to watch?"

Richie, who had been texting hurriedly, fingers seeming to barely touch the screen of his phone, spoke without looking up. He was wearing hole-ridden black gym shorts and a denim bomber jacket over his bare chest. Eddie thought if he was so damn cold why didn't he just put a shirt on? "Scary movies!"

"You always want to watch scary movies, Richie." Eddie said, crossing his arms over his chest. A little smile pulled at the corners of his mouth though.

Richie looked up now, tossing his phone on the table. The screen was shattered like a spiderweb, no doubt due to one of these haphazard tosses. "Scary movies are the BEST movies, Eds! You cuddle me when you get scared." He mocked pouted.

"I do not." Eddie replied. He had given up a long time ago on asking Richie to stop calling him these annoying pet names - Eds, Eddie Spaghetti - there was just no reasoning with him.

"What if we do a mix of things?" Beverly suggested through a mouthful of toast.

"Like, what?" Richie said, shoving his glasses back up the bridge of his sharp nose lense-first. Eddie made a grumbling sound and stepped forward, taking them carefully off of his face. He wiped them on the hem of his shirt, holding them up to the light, then wiped them some more. He replaced them slowly back onto Richie's nose, who smirked. He pushed them back up, lense-first.

Eddie rolled his eyes and went to the counter, hopping up onto it.

"I dunno, some action thrown in there. A classic maybe." Beverly shrugged.

Richie scoffed, throwing his feet up on the table. Eddie took lead and pushed them off. They hit the floor with a thud. He put them back up, shaking his head. "Classic equals Breakfast Club, and we have enough of that shit erryday in this house."

Beverly looked at the ceiling briefly, sighing and chewing loudly at him. She adjusted her septum piercing and looked at Bill. "What do you think, B?"

Bill blew air out through his lips fast and hard, raising his eyebrows. "I would say this is more like 'Animal House' ninety percent of the time."

Mike chuckled, going to the fridge. "Richie can be Bluto."

Eddie flipped one of the mismatched chairs around, sitting with the back pressed against his chest. "He uses his mouth for talking more than eating."



"There are lots of other things I can do with my mouth, Edward." He winked.

Beverly was the one to say, "Beep beep," this time. She bumped him with her shoulder and he leaned into it.

"No but seriously! What the fuck are we gonna watch though!" Richie laughed, waving a hand at Mike, who was eating a handful of grapes.

"I say one scary, follow up with something like 'Fast and Furious' - the new one just came out - and maybe we finish up with 'Princess Bride' or something."

Eddie perked up a bit and pointed at Mike, "Oooh yea I like that idea!"

Richie threw his head back cackling, black ribbons falling over his shoulders.

"If Eds wants to watch fucking 'Princess Bride' then goddammit we will watch 'Princess Bride'." He winked at Eddie, who put his hand over his cheek to hide the crimson that arose there.

"A scary one for sure?" Bill said, squinting at the paper and making a small checkmark next to the fine printed letters of the word "Mediterranean".

Richie looked at Eddie again. "I promise I'll hold your hand through the whole thing, Eds." Eddie put his head down and let out a long winded sigh.

So they had decided that Mike and Stan would make dinner, nothing terribly fancy but not just pizza. Richie insisted that 'Princess Bride' was on the list movie-wise, for Eddie of course, and they chose 'The Babadook' as their scary movie. Beverly was choosing the action portion of the evening, trailing her finger over the movie cases Ben had posted up on the bookshelf in their room. It took her two days to choose and she ended up going with 'Battle Royale', even though she knew Richie would complain that it involved reading because, "Tits, Bev, you know I can't read that fast!" to which she would reply, "Oh shit I thought you just couldn't fuckin' read, Rich." She knew it would

essentially end with Eddie whispering the lines to him throughout the film. But that was fine, they would all enjoy it. And probably after a while Richie would stop listening and just watch the violence unfold on screen.

Friday arrived, after what felt like months. Bill and Eddie walked in the front door, Bill texting as Eddie blathered on about bills, shuffling through a handful of mail.

"No one ever sends letters anymore. That makes me sad." He said.

Bill murmured at him, not paying attention.

Eddie peeked out of the corner of his eye at Bill's phone, the name 'Audra' at the top of the screen. It made Eddie's heart pound excitedly and he smiled.

They could hear Mike and Stan talking to Ben in the kitchen, the smells of salted water and garlic bread filling the air.

The two of them came into the room and the others smiled at him. Stan clapped his hands together.

"Pasta!" He shouted, gesturing at the stovetop.

It was indeed pasta, three pots of boiling liquid simmering with what looked like spaghetti noodles, an alfredo sauce and a deep red sauce with fat chunks of garlic and tomatoes floating around inside. No doubt that would be for Mike and Stan.

"We were thinking of doing some chicken as well, but Stan didn't want to touch it." Mike chuckled, nudging the blond boy with his elbow. Stan shrugged.

"Gallus gallus domesticus." He said matter-of-factly, and smirked at Mike.

Eddie and Ben looked at each other, confused, but they always seemed to be doing this when Stan used Latin around them. Eddie joined him at the table, Bill still texting away on his phone. He snorted quietly and continued typing.

Ben nodded at Bill. "Who's he talking to?" He whispered.

"Audra," Eddie replied, raising his eyebrows at Mike and Stan. They all nodded in understanding and smiled. Bill was talking to a girl!

The front door slammed open, Richie and Beverly shouting at one another, the intake draft bringing in with it the stale scent of cigarette smoke.

They too came into the kitchen, Beverly's face flushed with laughter. Bill looked up briefly then back at his phone.

"Is it time for dinner?" Richie shouted, ruffling Eddie's parted hair. Eddie attempted to flatten it down again and fidgeted in his seat, pulling the hem of his plain white t-shirt down over the lip of his jeans.

"Fifteen minutes," Stan said, stirring the pot of tomato sauce aimlessly. "Enough time for you to change."

Richie looked down at himself. He was wearing cutoff jeans, sewn up with patches for 'The Misfits' and 'The Dead Kennedys', scribbled from top to end with the colorful phrase, "Give me head 'till you're dead". His sleeveless denim vest hung loosely around his shoulder, a black Converse shirt underneath.

"I look fucking good today, thank you very little, Stanley." He crossed his arms and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flip of the head.

Stan raised his eyebrows, not looking at him. "I'm sure you and all the kids at Bible study think so, Trashmouth." Richie laughed.

"You're so fuckin' chuckalicious, man. Call me when it's ready. And you!" He said, jabbing Beverly in the chest softly as he moved towards the entryway. "We ain't fucking done, missy!"

She rolled her eyes. "Rich, give it up. Meg is ten times hotter than Jack. That's just science!" She moved to Ben at the table, sitting on his lap and giving him a quick peck on the mouth.

Richie was already halfway down the hall. "At the end of the day, I'd still put my cock in both of the-"

"Beep beep, Richie!" Mike, Eddie, and Stan shouted together.

Dinner was called twenty minutes later. The garlic bread had taken a little longer to bake than initially anticipated, Stan wringing his hands in front of the oven. While the other Losers set plates and glasses on the dining room table, Mike came up behind him and squeezed his arms, whispering, "Just bread, babe. Just bread."

They all sat down, Bill at the head of the table, Beverly on his left, then Ben then Mike, Stan, Eddie, and Richie. The early evening sun shuttered through the blinds, casting a dusty light over the table. Bill, who had finally put his phone away - though the other Losers could hear it buzzing excitedly in his back pocket - looked out over his best friends. It was crazy to him to think how they had all come together so many years ago, a ragtag group of kids who got picked on way too much in the hallways at school, who had a penchant for causing mischief down in the Barrens, seven kids who grew up to be this mismatched clique of young adults sitting before him.

"Thank you for cooking you guys," he said to Stan and Mike.

Mike was passing around the pot of noodles after putting a small helping on the plate in front of him. "It was the least of we could do."

Stan nodded, taking the pot next. "Thank YOU for finding this place. This has been one of the best months of my life."

Bill blushed. "It was a huge fluke, man. I can't believe you actually said yes." He looked at Ben and Beverly. They were holding hands looking at him.

"Shit a huge house with all my best friends? What could we possibly have said 'no' to?" Ben laughed. He was beaming at Bill, then to Richie next to him. Richie returned the smile, stifling back an inappropriate comment, Ben was sure.

Once dinner had been passed all around they sat waiting, and Stan said, "Should we pray?"

For a moment everyone was quiet and then the room filled with booming laughter.

"Yes pray to us in Hebrew!" Richie said, wiping an invisible tear from his eye.

Stan shook his head. "Sorry, can't remember a lick of it."

And they dug in.

The food was fantastic, even if it was just simple spaghetti. Ben and Mike helped themselves to seconds, Ben attempting a third but deciding against it. Halfway through, Richie suggested a food fight, but the looks he got from Eddie and Bill shot that idea down rather quickly. Eddie took it upon himself to start clearing the table even amongst the protests of Stan and Bill, Stan who was saying how HE had cooked the dinner he had to see the night through and Bill who said Eddie p-p-fuck-please sit the fuck down it doesn't need done right now. But he did so anyway, scraping the remains of sauces into the trash and rinsing the plates under the faucet. He wanted to wash them right then but Beverly, post-meal cigarette dangling between her fingers said, "If you try to wash those fucking dishes when we have movies to watch, I'll kick your ass." He left them sitting in the sink.

They waited for Richie and Beverly to smoke, a quick seven minute break, and Ben fiddled with the television, making sure all of the cords were hooked up to the right ports. Bill pulled the drapes over the window, blocking out the setting sun's rays and Mike flipped the lights, cutting the room into darkness. Eddie was setting up blankets and pillow into a nest on the floor to hide away behind in case 'The Babadook' got too scary. Stan was bringing in drinks, some beer for Bill, Ben, and Mike, Coke for himself and Eddie, and a bottle of wine he knew Beverly and Richie would pass between the two of them. He had these packed under his arm, a bowl of popcorn in his free hand. He set it on the small wobbly table on the left of the couch, and sat down next to Mike.

It was a huge couch, one that looked as if it had been part of a wrap-around at one point, tattered blue suede torn in some places. Mike smiled at Stan and they snuggled in next to each other, Ben on Stan's left. Bill took up a place in the armchair, phone in hand again, smiling quietly at the screen. Eddie nestled into the blankets as Richie and Bev came into the room. Bev sat next to Ben, picking up

the bowl of popcorn and tossing her legs over the arm of the couch, leaning her back into the crook of Ben's arm. Richie flopped down next to Eddie, trying to lank an arm over his shoulders. He wriggled out from under him.

"Don't do anything stupid, Rich." He pointed playfully.

Richie put a hand to his chest. "I would never. As long as you promise to read to me during the subtitled shit."

Eddie pressed his back against the couch, posted inbetween Ben's legs. "You can read plenty fast, Rich. I saw you finish 'War and Peace' in four days." Richie laughed and Bev passed him the popcorn bowl.

"I was studying." He said in a sly whisper.

"For fucking what?" Eddie replied.

"We ready?" Bill said, standing and going to the tv, which was blaring a bright blue screen out at them. They all nodded in confirmation, and Bill grabbed up the remote, closing the Blu-ray player's mouth and starting the disk.

The first movie wasn't too scary, they decided after it was all over, but there were definitely parts that made the group of them jump.

Bill had put his phone away, tucking his legs up closer to his chest so he could hide his eyes behind them occasionally. The only part that made his chest seize up was the car crash scene, taking him back eleven years, his tiny brother ripped from his life. Eddie saw him panting, and reached out his hand, setting it gently in Bill's own. Bill smiled and squeezed it, letting it fall and setting his chin on his knees.

There were a few parts where Eddie, in his fear, buried his face in Richie's shoulder, peeking up timidly to access the situation. Richie let him do it, smiling to himself, snarking hushed tones of "You can hide your face in my lap," Eddie replying but smiling in Richie's shirt sleeve, "Beep beep, Trashmouth."

Bev would jump occasionally and then giggle uncontrollably, Ben pulling her closer into his chest. He nuzzled his nose into her hair

and kissed her, staring at her in awe as she shoved a handful of popcorn in her mouth. She would occasionally take a sip of the wine - a sweet white - and pass it off to Richie, who would practically chug until she snatched it back again. Ben had seen the movie before and it didn't scare him as much as the first time, but the sound of the monster's voice creaking out of the speakers - "Babadook-doOK-DOOK" - still gave him goosebumps.

Mike sat quietly on the end of the couch, sipping occasionally from his beer. Stan had his legs pulled up crossed in front of him, tucking the blanket he had stolen from Eddie around his shoulders. He would occasionally say something like, "This makes no sense," or "Why doesn't she just move?" and at one point, "Burn the fucking book you idiot," and when she did he said, "See? Easy fix."

Mike's hand had found its way underneath the blanket and their fingers grazed one another's, Stan's twitching whenever something jumped on screen. Mike wanted so badly to grab it, lace his fingers around his boyfriend's, pull him into his lap like Beverly was in Ben's, kiss his curly hair and let him hide his face in the place where his collar met his throat. But he couldn't. Not yet, at least.

After it ended, Eddie pulled himself up away from Richie and coughed. "Well that was fucking scary."

Bev laughed, standing up and pulling her arms above her head in a stretch. "It wasn't awful. We've watched worse." She lightly slapped Richie's shoulder and he stood too.

"Eds you want scary I've got some homemade videos of me and your mom upstairs." Beverly punched him in the arm and they went outside, Eddie groaning and sliding down the front of the couch.

Mike stood, patting his legs. "Anyone need anything?" He said.

Bill looked at the two empty beer bottles on the side table. "Got any more beer?"

Mike looked at his own empty bottle and Ben's two as well. "I can grab some more. Eddie, you need anything?" Eddie shook his Coke can, empty now.

"I gotta pee before the next one, but I'll take a Tanq and tonic if we have any!" He bolted up, headed towards the hall where one of the bathrooms was.

Mike chuckled. "I'll figure something out."

Stan looked at him. "I'll help." Mike smiled coyly and nodded. They went to the kitchen and Ben got up to put the next disk in.

The second movie was fun, fast and different and loud. Eddie read most of the first scene to Richie before he said, "You know what, you can fucking read, I'm missing all the action." Richie pinched his cheek.

"Fuckin' cute!"

The movie went on without incident, the sun having completely set and darkness encased the house. As 'Battle Royale' came to a close, no one moved.

"Are we ready for 'Princess Bride', Eddie?" Bill asked, standing to change the disk. But he did not answer.

Bill looked at his friends. They had all passed out clean. He had wondered why it got so quiet - Bev and Richie usually talked a lot through action movies. Stan was the one who talked during paranormal films, pointing out the inconsistencies and obvious "electric issues" that could cause a haunting. Eddie was a romcom talker, saying how the girl was being stupid or how the guy should find a man, stuff like that. But they were all dead asleep.

Bill looked at the clock on his phone. It was a little after midnight. Audra had gone to bed around 9:30; she had to work early the next day. Beverly's legs were still folded over the arm of the couch, her chest rising and falling with sleep, laying over Ben's lap. Ben himself had his head propped up on his hand, eyes closed and fluttering, dreaming. Mike and Stan had fallen asleep with their heads leaning against one another, Stan sort of cuddled up to Mike. Richie and Eddie were the only ones who looked like they'd fallen asleep with a plan, Richie's head leaned against a pillow placed at the foot of the couch, his long legs spread out in front of him, uncovered. Eddie's



head was on a pillow he had placed on Richie's chest and his leg was thrown over Rich's waist. They all looked so peaceful, silently in the throws of dreams. Bill just smiled at them.

He didn't feel tired just yet, so he put on 'Princess Bride' anyway. His eyes drooped as he carefully stole away a blanket and pillow from Eddie, who made a grumbling sound but did not wake up. He wrapped himself up in a cocoon and pressed play, falling quickly into sleep before even the first, "As you wish."

Ben huffed out hard, wiping sweat from his eyes and taking a long swig from his bottle of water. The heavy July sun was beating down on everything, he and Mike included. They were working on the house, Mike leaning dangerously over the top of the portico, which sagged a little under his weight, and took an extra bottle of water from Ben.

The two had been up on the roof already today, a little past noon now, and had already replaced the missing shingles up there. It had cost a pretty penny to get all of the extra supplies but Ben had borrowed the tools needed from work. Ben, wiping away a stream of sweat from his brow, looked at Beverly. She was lounging out under the sun with Stan, her freckled porcelain skin shining alabaster. Ben looked at her, whispering to Stan about his book. The two looked content and Ben's heart still caught in his chest when he looked at her.

Things had changed so much over the past twelve years, but Bev was still as beautiful as day one. Ben thought of all the Losers he had changed the most. Granted he was still a poet, still a man who enjoyed math and geometry, still stupidly in love with Beverly Marsh.

He pulled his sweat-ridden grey shirt over his head, tossing it on the porch. His body was soft, lightening strikes of stretch marks cast across his stomach and pulling up through the top of his jeans. On the right side of his stomach was a thin scar of the letter 'H', crudely carved into his skin by one Henry Bowers. He had extra skin that fell in a small pouch near the top of his pants as well, but he didn't mind it. And no one else seemed to mind either. He looked good - shit - he felt good. His arms were swollen up from all the lifting he had done since sophomore year, his legs thick and toned as well from running

track. His light brown hair was cropped up close to his head, making the heat a little more bearable. He wore a thin five o'clock shadow across his face.

"Do you think we'll have time for the turret this week too?" Mike asked and they looked at it.

Ben shrugged. The siding would take time, what with the slats being rounded. "Depends on our work schedules I suppose. And what plans the other guys have. We don't want to wake Richie up at 7 in the morning again with our hammering."

Mike laughed, taking another drink of water. "He's at the back of the house, he'll survive."

Ben nodded. He tossed a glance back to Bev and Stan. They had their heads pressed in close together as if they were sharing some daring secret. He didn't feel jealous. Shit, Richie actually straight up hit on Bev and he never felt anything but humor towards the situation. He knew Bev could handle herself and that his best friends wouldn't actually try to pull anything. It was easy being in love with her, simple.

When they were kids, he always worried that she didn't love him like he loved her. He had always noticed how she and Bill doted on one another. When she moved away after his thirteenth summer, all he could think is that he would never see her again, that he had built his love up for the beautiful fire-haired girl only to lose her as a friend. But she had come back the following summer, taller and more vibrant than ever. She had kissed him that summer, after he told her how he felt. She had interrupted him halfway through saying, "Ben I've known. I've known for a while. But have you known that I love you too?" Then the kiss. Soft and subtle, it had filled his chest with radiating lightening, and from then on they were an item, even as so unofficially. She left at the end of that season, starting her freshman year up in Portland. He had stayed, fourteen, nearly fifteen, and starting to get restless in his legs. He grew slowly, still chubby, but growing into his face a little more.

In the spring semester of his freshman year he was getting roughed up particularly badly by a bunch of seniors and Mike hadn't been

around to help that time. The track coach had broken up the fight, but made a snide comment when it was just them about how he brought it on himself. That was the first time Ben Hanscom had ever really seen red. Rage surged through every inch of him. The coach was walking away and Ben took a step forward, grabbing him by the arm and twirling him around.

Finger pointed like a dagger, Ben promised him - he couldn't even be bothered to remember the man's name now - that he would show him. The following spring, he would be out on the track, beating his best. The coach had laughed in his face and that seemed all it had taken to snap Ben into gear.

He started lifting, running, doing squats, barbells, lunges - anything and everything that could give him the strength to outdo the best. He started slow, granted, but by the end of that first summer's training he could nearly outrun Silver as Bill pedaled as fast as he could, and by winter, he had jumped a whole foot, his long legs out-sprinting Mike as he practiced for football.

That next spring, he showed up on the field at the first track meet of the season. The coach had seen him standing behind the runners, pulling his leg up behind in him a stretch. It had probably taken him a moment to recognize Ben, what having grown a full foot and packing muscle under his shirt instead of baby fat. When the starter gun went off, Ben waited a few seconds to let the other runners get a few yards out, and then he took off in a dead sprint. The coach, standing at the finish line, watched him with a furious curiosity, as he pulled up in front of the fourth place, third place, second place runner, until he was fifty yards in front of the first runner. As Ben passed him, he took a quick moment to pull his left hand up into a middle finger, dragging it past the coach's flabbergasted face as he crossed the tape.

After the others had crossed the finish line, Ben waltzed up to the coach, a ringing in his ears and the hoots and hollers of Mike, Stan, Bill, Richie, and Eddie in the bleachers cheering him on.

"What the fuck did you just do, boy?" The coach asked, his face a dark blood-beet color. Ben, panting, pointed at the actual track kids, who were staring at him, hands on their knees.

"I just beat your best," he said. "That's what the fuck I just did." He laughed in his face, much like the old man had done not a year ago to him.

That was when he was taken in the jaw by a swift sucker punch, nearly laying him out on the AstroTurf.

Police had been called, a report was taken, but Ben didn't press any charges. It wasn't worth it, he had said to Richie and Bill, sporting the split and swollen lip with proud indignation, but the coach was still fired anyhow.

And at the end of that year, sixteen years old now, Beverly had come back to Derry. The boys had been waiting at the quarry, early June sunlight peeking out through the clouds when they'd heard her pull up in her jeep. They all turned and looked, watching as she slammed the car door and jogged towards them, a sheer white swimming suit cover billowing over her bikini. Ben had stood first, then the others, Ben dusting the dirt off his trunks. His heart had been pounding so hard, nervous to see what she'd think for some reason.

She pulled up to the group, a smile wide on her face, a stud in the right nostril of her nose. She stopped dead in her tracks when her eyes fell on him, a bright rose color taking to her cheeks. His face reciprocated the action and he looked away, embarrassed.

"Ben?" She said, her voice almost womanly. She put a hand to her mouth, a smile glowing behind it. He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. She was looking at him up and down, naked except for his swimsuit. The other boys just stood looking between Ben and Bev, just waiting.

Bev broke the silence with a high-pitched scream, throwing her hands into her hair and laughing.

"Oh my fucking god what did you do!" She ran up to him, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling her legs up around his waist. She was lighter to him now, his strong arms tucking up under her butt. The other Losers were watching, smiling. When he set her down, she couldn't stop looking at his eyes, her's an endless ocean, his a swimming galaxy. They had stared, in stunned silence, at one

another, until Mike suggested they go swimming. They had, but Ben and Bev could not take their eyes off one another.

Later that evening, when they were all heading home - Richie and Stan packed up in Richie's truck, Eddie, Bill, and Mike walking, and Ben riding along with Beverly - his mind was whirling. He couldn't stop thinking about the way she screamed, how excited she was. He thought about the previous summer, how she hadn't been that excited, and for some reason the thought made him sad. Would she love him more because he was thin? Did she ever actually love him, really? Or was she taking pity on the awkward fat boy?

He sat with his hands in his lap as she drove, the radio playing something he didn't recognize. He felt her looking at him occasionally but he was afraid to make eye contact with her. He had just stared out the window as they came up on his house, his mother sitting in the living room with the blinds open.

"Ben, what's going on?" She asked as she threw the vehicle into park. He sat up, as if he had just awoken from a nap and looked in her direction. His stomach ached, fear bubbling in it.

He shook his head, looking anywhere but at her directly. "Nothing, just a long day."

Beverly pursed her lips at him, cocking her head. "That's bullshit and you know it. What happened? Something happened between me getting to the quarry and now."

He sighed, wiping his hands down his legs. "Bev," he paused. He leaned his head against the passenger side window briefly, then pulled up again, gathering the courage to look her in the eye. Her eyebrows were knotted down in frustration at him and he felt a pang of guilt.

"You know I love you right?" He said, barely above a whisper.

She made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Yes. And I love you."

Ben shook his head slightly. "No like I'm in love with you. Stupidly so."

She blew air out her mouth, a short laugh. "Yes, I know."

He looked at his fingers. They looked huge to him all of a sudden, too big for his hands. He felt like he should go for a run.

"I have loved you for three years, Ben." Her voice caught him off guard, and he looked up at her, swallowing the knot in his Adam's apple.

She was smiling softly at the steering wheel, running her finger over the faux tiger fur she had put there. She and Eddie had spent nearly 45 minutes trying to figure it out as the others had watched from the lawn of Stan's house, laughing as Eddie tried to just slip it on, but it kept falling off. Mike had got it to stay, and the two of them had been so mad at how simple it was.

"And I don't mean love like I love Stan or Rich or Eddie or Mike or even Bill. I'm in love with you too." She looked at him. Her eyes were soft.

He shifted in the seat, the seatbelt snugging around his shoulder. "Do you love me more because I'm not fat now?" His voice was even quieter this time.

She turned fully in her seat, pulling a leg up. "Did you not hear what I just said?" There was no malice in her voice, just slight impatience.

He looked out the windshield, searching for something to say. How could he explain this fear? That he was only important and wanted because he was thin? How do you explain that to someone who has always been thin and beautiful?

"I just don't want you to like me more now that I'm not fat." He turned again, and her hands squeezed the sides of his face. He was forced to look into her eyes.

She searched his own. "There's nothing wrong with being fat. I loved you then and I love you now." She sighed. "Now kiss me, goddammit." So he did, weaving his hand into her hair.

The kisses became heated, panting and pulling, the windows of the jeep becoming filmed with fog. Beverly's hand was on his thigh and

his was on her chest. She pulled away, eyes half-closed, lips swollen and pink.

"Let's go somewhere." She said, and he nodded. They had driven an hour outside of town, and laid out under the stars, holding hands and talking about every single thing they could think of until they had fallen asleep, the two of them curled up with their noses touching, arms wrapped around one another.

Ben had decided the next morning, waking up next to her, dew gathering on the grass, that he was going to marry her.

"Stan!" Mike called down, and Stan looked up, covering his eyes with his hand.

"Do you know when Richie works this week?" He asked.

Stan looked at Bev, and they whispered for a second.

"He just got a job at the radio station I guess, so maybe he's off Tuesday? He works the ten to four shift."

"So he'll sleep during till like 2?" Ben said, not really to anyone but himself.

Stan shrugged. "Probably."

Ben looked at Mike with a wicked grin. "Then I guess we'll work on the turret that day."

Mike choked a little, laughing.

Ben looked at Bev and Stan, who were shaking their heads.

They lay in bed that night, trying to catch their breath and pressing their sticky skin as closely together as possible. The window above the bed was open, letting in some desperately needed fresh air. Ben had his arm wrapped around Beverly, who had her arm tucked up around his neck. He kissed her gently on the head, inhaling fully and sighing.

He hadn't planned on them making love, but Beverly had a tendency

of making plans for them this way.

They'd been in the kitchen, standing at the island, Bev eating a slice of cold pizza and Ben looking over a mock up for an addition to the library. He had picked this up after the library project supervisor had seen his additions to the bank. Eddie and Stan were going over a budget, a calculator pulled out in front of them. Richie and Bill were out buying groceries and Mike was out at his parents, helping fix their tractor.

Ben hadn't been looking directly at her, but he could see her pacing in front of him. He peeked over the blueprints and there she was, just looking at him, her eyes narrowed. She had a tiny grin on her lips, an eyebrow raised at him.

She spoke in a hushed voice at him, leaning her elbow on the island. "You looked good working on the house babes." He smiled and cocked his head, looking over at Stan and Eddie. They were wrapped up in their numbers and calculations.

"Did I?" He said, looking back at her. She nodded.

He smirked. "You looked good just laying around, baby girl."

She tossed her piece of pizza on its plate and chewed slowly. "Wanna make out?" She asked.

He laughed and began rolling up the blueprint. "Um, yes." He stood abruptly and turned to go upstairs, Beverly not too far behind him.

"We'll be back later guys." Ben said, taking Beverly's hand.

"Ok, have fun." Stan said, looking over the tiny reading glasses he wore at the paperwork.

"Try to keep the screaming to a minimum." said Eddie, leaning over the edge of his chair. Stan laughed.

They had got upstairs, their clothes barely making the entrance, and then they were on one another. It was fast and dirty, something just to be able to touch each other.



And now they lay next to one another, soaking in the smell of each other's sweat and the summer rain on its way.

Ben was staring dead ahead at the popcorned ceiling, his eyes wide. He couldn't slow his heart. He was nervous again.

"I love you Beverly." He said, his voice wavering a little.

Her chin pulled up on his chest, looking at him. She smiled meekly and cuddled her face into him again, breathing him in deeply. "I love you too baby."

He sighed again, trying to choose his next set of words. He gulped, his free hand tracing the 'H' on his abdomen. He did that sometimes when he was thinking, or scared, the motion taking him back to the Bowers gang, to real, tangible fear.

He could feel his fingers shaking against his skin. He couldn't concentrate on any one thing, ten hundred things swirling around his mind. The only thing he could do was go for it.

"Bev."

"Ben." She said in the same tone.

"Bev, I want to get married."

The room swelled with a palpable silence, and Beverly froze against him.

He couldn't seem to catch his breath, suddenly wishing Eddie had a spare inhaler hidden away somewhere in the house. He couldn't look at her either, he was terrified waiting for her to speak. But she hadn't made any sound, so he started to wonder if she had even heard him.

"Bev?" He said quietly, turning his chin down to her.

She wasn't looking at him, instead her gaze was planted on the door to the bathroom, her eyes glazed over with a far away look. Her eyebrows were pulled down, almost angry...or like she wanted to cry.

"Hey," he said, sitting up a little bit, putting a hand on her cheek. She

jerked back from the sudden movement, and he recoiled his hand, guilt coming over him in a wave.

She sat up fully, pulling the comforter with her. He sat up against the headboard. He wanted to reach out and place his palm against the flat of her back, but he was worried she would pull away again.

"Bev, baby, what's wrong?" He said.

She turned her head towards him but didn't speak. Her hair was slicked against her forehead with sweat, the liner bleeding a little under her eyes. She didn't look directly at him, either.

"Baby, talk to me." His knees folded against his chest and he wrapped his arms around them, curling his toes underneath his cold feet. He couldn't stop staring at the back of her head.

January embers.

She breathed hard. Pulling the blanket up over her left shoulder. Ben scooped up closer to her, leaning his crossed knees against where her back met the curve of her hips, and he caressed her bare shoulder. She looked over it at him.

"Bev -"

"No."

He paused, his breath hooking around his tonsils.

"What?"

She twisted fully so she was facing him, the blue comforter falling softly over her breasts. She stared at her fingers, screwing with a loose thread on the edge of the sheet.

Her eyes turned up to him. "I said no." Her voice was small, almost drowned out completely by a deep roll of thunder in the distance.

For some reason, Ben couldn't wrap his mind around the words.

No. She had said no.

"Okay." He replied, his mind not really working with his voice. The response echoed around the room, a huge catacomb, the air suddenly stale and dry.

"I'm sorry." She said. She made a move to get up, and he was motivated to grab her arm, to stop her. But he didn't. He let her get up. Pull a shirt over herself, pull panties and a pair of sweatpants on. He couldn't stop staring at a spot on the messed comforter. It looked like old blood, but he couldn't be sure.

After she finished cinching up the pants, she ran a hand through her hair and twirled on her heel, glaring hard at him. He was looking at her face but couldn't see any her features. He realized it was because his eyes were blurring with tears.

"Aren't you going to ask me why?" She said, her voice louder than it had been previously. It shook him a little bit, and he absentmindedly rubbed the thin white scar again.

"Why not, Beverly?" His voice cracked.

She exhaled loudly, and went to the window that faced the east and yanked it open. She sat on the sill, taking a pack of Camels off the dresser and grabbed one, lighting the tip, she took a long drag and began pacing.

"I just... you just... I can't..." She took another drag.

She paused to make eye contact then went back to it, creating a small pathway of ruffled fibers in the rug. "Marriage, Ben? Are you serious?"

He couldn't put the question into terms. Why was that so ridiculous? They'd been together nearly seven years. They loved each other, were in love with each other. Marriage? Out of the question?

"Absolutely." Ben replied.

Beverly laughed, a sickening sound, unnatural coming from her.

"Ben we cannot get fucking married." She pulled the cigarette to her lip again and inhaled, the thick fumes curling around her head and

into the air. He usually didn't mind the smell, he could even say he liked the taste when it came from her mouth. But right now it was just giving him a headache.

"Why not?" He asked. His voice was unwavering now, like a church mouse.

"Ben," she scoffed, incredulously, "We're 23! We're fucking kids! We haven't - " she pulled at her own hair, searching, grasping, begging the word to come to her, any fucking word. "We haven't done anything! Jesus. Marriage. You know who else was married?"

It clicked for him then. Of course. "Your parents?" He finally caught her eye. She stopped pacing, mouth agape, staring at him. The air was tense, heavy and thick, tension sliceable with a knife, a sharp serrated blade.

"What did you say?" Her face was twisted up in anger and melancholy.

He stood, stark naked as he walked to the dresser and grabbed a pair of shorts. "You heard me." He didn't mean to sound cruel, his voice did that all on its own.

"My parents have nothing to do with this -"

"That's a lie, Beverly. I'm sorry, but it is." He wasn't even angry. The voice coming from his mouth wasn't angry, it was something entirely different but animalistic nonetheless. It was pain.

Her cigarette was practically all ash now, her having let it burn down with her constant puffing on it. She was shaking, her tiny ring-covered hands clenched into fists. The girl he loved. Small, but fierce.

He was beginning to wonder, in an aching feeling that gnawed at the back of his skull, if she really did love him. He felt every inch of his stretch marks now, sure that they blazed in the dim lighting of their bedroom, THEIR bedroom, the one they had made their own with the stupid drapes and rug and the stark black and white photos of all of them - the Losers - framed up on the wall. It was theirs.

He just needed the clarification. He understood, even if she didn't

think he did. Even if she didn't want to admit it to herself.

Sometimes she knew him better than himself, but he was the same for her.

Her daddy was a rabid man, not much of a drinker, but damn if he couldn't pack a punch. Her mom wanted so desperately to escape - he hit them both of course - but where could they go? How could they survive? He held the bank accounts, he had the car title. Everything was his.

Ben knew about all this. Beverly had told him every piece of this, he and she both sobbing. Her daddy, she came to realize when she was older - "Thank Christ", she had said, taking a drag off of her fifth chain smoke - that he had much more sinister plots in mind. But she had escaped to her aunt's in Portland with her mom before anything could go that far. Her mom had cried for weeks about how sorry she was, how she should have protected them better. But Beverly didn't blame her mom. She blamed her daddy, the bastard.

She was afraid, Ben thought, that they would get married, have children, and then maybe...he would start hitting her. The thought made his stomach burn, and he fought the urge to start bawling. He wanted to keep his head clear so he didn't fuck this up.

"I don't need your fucking protection, Benjamin." She snapped at him, flicking her cigarette out the window. Rain had started coming down a bit now, thunder rolling occasionally.

He shook his head slowly. "I never said you did. I never wanted to protect you, or fix you, or any of that. You know that."

"If you're under the impression I think you'd become my dad-"

"That's exactly what I think, Bev." He had tucked his hands behind his head. His chest hurt. Everything was stacking together in a tightness that crowded his lungs. He wanted to reach out and hold her - she trembled madly all over now - but he was afraid she'd pull away.

She just stared, her eyes hollow points in her face, and she didn't speak.

"I'm not trying to fight," Ben said. "If you don't want to get married then fine." He paused, the tears threatening the lashline now.

"But if that's the case, then I need to think about some things." He tried not to watch as her face fell, disappointed and frightened.

"Are you...are you breaking up with me?" She asked, her voice practically a squeak emitted from a closing door hinge.

He shook his head, going to the bed. He grabbed a pillow and a blanket. Every step he took felt like he had added back on fifteen pounds until it was almost too much to lift his feet. He caught her blues, she was biting the corner of her mouth to keep herself from crying.

"I don't think I could if I wanted to, and I don't want to. But my offer stands. So I'm going to give you some time. To think about what you want, what I want...what we can do." He crossed the room to her and tried to bring her lips to his, but she didn't reciprocate. He kissed her gently on the forehead instead.

He went to the bedroom door, his hand tentatively on the knob, turned partially in his hand. The blanket tried to tumble out from underneath his arm and he shifted his grip on it.

"I love you Ben." She said, her voice breaking.

He looked at her, the door ajar now. He knew he didn't have to go but it had to work for the night. "I love you too, Beverly. Take your time."

He went out in the hallway, ignoring the fact that he could hear someone on the other side of Richie's door, many someones, and down the stairs, to sleep away from the love of his life because of a fight for the first time in seven years.

### **3. Ch 3: Bill Denbrough Takes a Timeout**

Grey storm clouds perched above the house, their heavy ruffles threatening a sweet, sticky rain. The humidity was through the roof, the windows slick with condensation.

The house at 29 Neibolt was abnormally quiet on this July afternoon, the Losers cast to opposite corners of the building. Ben had already left for work, the tension between he and Beverly still untouchable. It had been two weeks and Ben was still sleeping on the couch, his blanket a wadded up fleece ball on the arm. Beverly didn't seem to be sleeping. Mike and Richie discussed they heard her pacing in the middle of the night, the sound of the eastward window sliding open coming at twenty minute intervals. Bill tried to talk to Ben, his hand on his shoulder, talking low like one would to a distraught child, but Ben wouldn't, couldn't say much. The fact that he and Beverly were fighting made his chest hurt.

Richie had done the same with Beverly, coming into the master bedroom with a bottle of whiskey, his hands clasped politely at his waist. Beverly had been sitting at the window, smoke perfuming the room. She looked at him sadly, then the bottle of Jack, and shook her head. Neither of them would talk.

But the others knew what had happened for the most part. They had all been piled into Richie's room, Eddie pressing his ear to the paper-thin walls, relaying the conversation that was taking place back to them.

"They aren't yelling?" He said, his voice raising at the end in confusion, looking at Mike.

"But they are fighting?" Mike asked. Stan and Bill were standing next to one another, arms folded carefully over their chests. Mike's face had fallen, deep creases bridging the gap between his eyes.

Eddie shrugged. "Beverly sounds upset, that's for sure." He looked at Richie sitting on his bed. He looked concerned, rubbing his eyes over his contacts. It looked like he was touching their brown irises and Eddie shivered.

"What could they be fighting about? We saw them an hour ago." Stan whispered.

Richie, ever trying to lighten the mood, said, "Maybe he tried to put it somewhere she didn't like."

Bill and Stan turned to glare at him. "You're a fucking asshole, Richie." Bill said, shaking his head.

Richie didn't reply, just looked at his hands, tearing at his ragged fingernails.

They stood there in quiet reverie until they heard the door to the master open and they rushed the door, waiting to see if they could hear anything else. Outside Richie's, Ben carried a blanket and pillow downstairs, not saying a word.

"Something to do with marriage," Eddie said as his footsteps receded down the long hallway.

Bill brow furrowed. "Why would they be fighting about that?" There was a group-wide shrug and they had all gone back to their rooms, the overhanging fear of disruption of their family looming.

Now Beverly was posted up in her, well their, room, folding laundry. Richie was listening to music in his bedroom, Lua by Bright Eyes sifting under the doorway. Bill was lounging in the armchair, grading some papers from his summer school class. Stan and Mike were napping in Mike's room, Stan curled up gently into Mike's right side, breathing softly. Eddie was scribbling furiously in the red notebook on his desk, writing out his mind's wanderings.

Beverly put down a shirt she had folded in its respective pile, Ben's t-shirts. She stared at them with watery eyes, and adjusted her septum piercing. It was bothering her more than normal today, and she wished she could just take it out, but the cartilage had healed up around the hoop in the center. She would have to rip it out at this point.

She sighed, a soft drizzle beginning to fall outside. The lights were all off in the room, except for a hazy yellow lamp they had placed next



to the bed and the flickering flame of a vanilla scented candle. The house was too quiet, she thought, perhaps everyone else had left. To go to work, to go for a walk, to the Barrens or the library maybe. She left the clothes on the made-up bed, and went to the door, slowly inching it open. The hall was quiet as well, except for music coming out of Richie's room.

She slipped into the hall, turning the knob to close it without having it click, and knocked three times in rapid succession against Richie's door.

"Come in," he said, his voice muffled.

She entered the room, a dark mess of, well, Richie. Clothes were scattered across the floor, she couldn't honestly be sure if they were clean or dirty, the closet door thrown open, empty hangers filling the inside. There was a small tv stand with a 20 inch television sat on top of it, a YouTube playlist pulled up on its screen. Right now it was playing The Same Deep Water as You by The Cure. An ancient plush armchair sat next to it, an acoustic guitar resting against the base, propped up with a stack of flimsy paperbacks.

Richie was nowhere to be seen, except the lump of comforter bunch on the bed. He was completely hidden except for a small tuft of curly black hair poking out at the foot of the bed. Beverly went to him and sat gingerly.

"Hey," she said quietly.

He peeked his head out, tucking the blanket up under his chin and propping himself up on his elbow. "Hey." He replied.

His eyes, deep brown caps of drooping sunflower heads, looked sad, and it made her heart ache. His glasses lay folded awkwardly on the floor.

They sat staring at one another for a moment, the shallow drowned lose less than we, you breathe the strangest twist upon your lips, settling over them.

Beverly broke the silence. "Ben asked me to marry him."

Richie sat up fully and placed a hand on hers. He studied her eyes for a minute. "And you said no."

Her breath choked in her throat, a knot the size of a fist growing there, and her eyes burned. She didn't want to cry, but the tears came anyhow. They slipped down her sunspotted cheeks, and when she closed her deepened lids, more torrented out. Richie wrapped himself around her, enveloping her into his bare chest. She put a hand on his shoulder, grasping at nothing and sobbed into his skin. He stroked her hair like only someone who had seen you through the worst could do, gentle and caring.

As kids, they were each other's go-to when shit hit the fan. Whether it be Bev's father hitting her so hard she threw up from the radiating pain, or Richie's drunk mother telling him how she should have had an abortion, they could often be found tapping on one another's windows at 2 am, crawling under the covers until their feet were warm from the closeness. Richie was the first person Beverly told when she lost her virginity to Ben, Richie throwing his hands up for a high five and saying, "Fucking Christ one of us finally got laid!" and Bev was the first one Richie came to when he realized he was bisexual, but not the, "only two bisexual," the "everyone bisexual". They were each other's ride or die, going to concerts together, taking punches for one another, smoking in the Barrens when the rest of the Losers were busy with their own lives. They were all close, true, but no one, not even Ben, was as close to Beverly as Richie.

She pulled away, sniffing and wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. Rich brushed a bang off her forehead with his left hand, a stark black tattoo on his wrist. She took his hand gently and looked at it.

It was the words beep beep in small type font. The ink was fresh, still ridged as she touched the pads of her fingertips against it.

"When'd you get this?" She asked him, sniffing hard.

He twisted the arm in her hand, examining the tattoo. "Last week. Thought it might teach me to shut the fuck up once in a while." He laughed. "I was going to ask you to go get another with me, but you seemed too down. I didn't want to push you." He looked up at her.

She chuckled, letting his hand drop. "Four matching tattoos? That could have been excessive."

They were each littered with permanent ink, a Star Wars half sleeve started on Richie's right arm and an extensive art piece of a watercolor water pitcher, pouring out over a gathering of mountains - for Aquarius, Richie knew - on Bev's left leg. Richie also had Eddie's name scrawled over heart, which was a joke, "I swear to god it's a fucking joke, relax, Eds," but "it's fucking permanent you dumb shit!", the cover art from Cage the Elephant's single Cold Cold Cold and a snake on his right forearm. He told people it was so he always had a reference of his dick size, but the Losers knew it was because he had been sorted into Slytherin on Pottermore.

Their matching tattoos were a small arrow on the back of their necks, pointing towards the sky, a collaborating emoji tattoo on their ankles, - Richie had the eggplant and Bev had the peach - and the final matching tattoo was one all of the Losers had. They had all piled into Bev's jeep, Ben in the passenger seat, Stan, Bill, and Mike in the seats directly behind them, with Richie and Eddie smashed tangled up in the very back. The tattoo artist, a short ginger man with a nose piercing and a beanie had stared them up and down and asked what they wanted. Bill had pulled out a piece of paper and slid it across the counter to him. It was the word 'loser', 's' scratched over with a stark red 'v', making it say 'lover'. Eddie had come up with the addition of the 'v'. They had all got it the exact same size in different places in their bodies. Eddie had placed his above his heart, Stan on the inside of his left wrist, Bill across his left bicep, Ben on the back of his right ankle, Mike on the soft skin of his right forearm, and Beverly and Richie had got theirs on the ring fingers of their right hands.

"Naw," Richie said, leaning up to cross his legs in front of him. "Just thought a little pain might make you feel better."

Beverly chuckled. She rubbed her finger against the new tattoo again.

She sighed. "I don't know what to do, Rich."

He huffed and untangled himself from the blankets, going to the desk. He picked up a pack of cigarettes and shook it at her. "Smoke

break?" She nodded.

They stood under the awning of the porch, crushing the cigarettes between their index and middle fingers. Richie had thrown on a denim jacket and they stood close together.

Richie looked out at the rain covered street. "Do you love him?" He asked.

She stared off at a spot on the dead end sign at the end of the road. After a moment she replied, "Of course I do."

Richie looked at her, his glasses slipping down his nose. "Do you want to marry him?"

It took her longer to reply this time. She did. Even if there was something inside of her that said she couldn't, shouldn't marry him. It was the fear...the fear more than anything. Ben was right, she worried about the past repeating itself. She had spoken to her mom about it one afternoon. Her daddy hadn't started hitting her until after they had been married - a modest ceremony with all of twenty-five people there. He stopped while she was pregnant and then started back up again after Beverly was born. By then he'd completely taken control of all the money, even yet mother's paychecks went into his bank account.

Beverly, even if she couldn't admit it to herself or anyone else, worried that this relationship was too good to be true. That of course Ben would start beating her. Her daddy hit her and her mom. And he had apparently seemed so nice before - her daddy.

But she couldn't stop push the ultimate feeling that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Ben, that she wanted to be able to keep him. But she knew one didn't have to be married to their partner to spend their whole lives together. But she thought that for Ben, it was the symbolism behind it. To have people know that you were one entity because of rings you wore on your left hands. To share the same last name. Joint taxes, health insurance, all of that shit. Beverly understood the sentiment but...she didn't know.

"I mean that's what you're supposed to do, right?" She laughed, taking

a drag off her cigarette. "Settle down, buy a house, pop out 2.5 kids, and die in Florida?"

The corner of Richie's lip pulled up in a smirk. "You've never been one for traditionalism."

She nodded. "But it's what he wants...and I," she paused. "I want him."

Another pause. "I love him. More than I should."

Richie shuffled his feet and grimaced at her. "You've been together for seven years, Bev. You love him the perfect amount."

She shrugged to herself and tapped the ash off the end of her cigarette. "Do you think I should get married, Rich?"

Richie stretched his arms over his head and stabbed his cigarette out in the ashtray Stan insisted they put out and then empty once a week. "You shouldn't do anything you don't want to. Ben would understand. He knows you Bev." Richie linked his arm through hers, and she leaned her head against his arm.

"I don't know what to do."

He put his chin on the top of her head. "I can only give you so much advice babes. You need to talk to him about this."

She sighed and too put out her cigarette. Even if it was to tell him her final no, or not yet, or yes, Richie was right. This was something she needed to figure out and discuss with Ben.

She missed him.

Mike awoke, the sky still dark with rain, Stan out cold in his side. He looked at his watch, a little past 4:30. He had slept most of the day away, curled up contentedly next to his boyfriend. He watched his face for a moment, a curl having fallen down onto the bridge of his nose. Mike brushed his finger gently over the soft skin of Stan's cheek and kissed him on the nose. Stan stirred momentarily, a sleepy smile growing on his lips, but he remained fast asleep. Mike carefully pulled his arm out from under him and rambled out of bed to stand at the window and watch the rain for a moment. His father would no

doubt be rounding up the horses and sheep, throwing tarps over the hay so that it didn't mold. His mother was probably in the kitchen, baking bread or washing strawberries, some daytime soap on the small television they kept next to the microwave.

For a moment, he was struck with the wonderment if he called them and told them he was bringing Stan to dinner, but not as the smartly dressed friend he brought around occasionally for holidays or birthday celebrations with the other Losers, just him, as his boyfriend. His parents, while never being by any means homophobic, had never really given any indication of their feelings on the matter. He didn't think he had given them any reason to think he himself was gay, and they had said many times whilst growing up they loved him no matter what, but he just wasn't sure.

That was something he would also have to talk to Stan about. Mike himself knew he wanted to shout it to the world that he was in love with this man - Stanley Isaac Uris STANLEY ISAAC URIS GODDAMMIT I AM IN LOVE WITH STANLEY ISAAC URIS - and sweep him up into his arms and kiss him, once, twice, fifty times!, until Stan was begging him to be let down and blushing like fire had taken root in his cheekbones. But he knew that Stan was shy, and perhaps even afraid, of what could happen. He knew even if being out was more widely accepted these days, it was not the "norm". Whatever that truly meant. And Mike wanted to keep Stan safe and happy. So Mike would wait. He would kiss him quietly in darkened corners of rooms, hold his hand under the armrest at the movies, make love to him when the house was empty. He would keep their secret as long as Stan wanted. Because he wanted Stan.

From the hallway came the dense sound of footsteps, Ben's, he could tell, and the door to he and Beverly's room opened. There was some whispering, but the walls in the house were so thin that Mike could hear everything plain as day.

"Hey," Beverly said to Ben.

"Hey," he replied. His voice sounded tired, sad even. "How are you?"

She probably shook her head here, there was no immediate aloud response. Then she said, "How are you?"

He responded the same, no words.

"Do you want to talk?" Beverly asked. Mike inched to the door, picking his feet up and setting them down carefully on the floor so as not to hit any of the squeaky boards. He went to the wall that connected to Ben and Beverly's, pressing his hands and ear flat to the old baby blue paint.

He heard the door to their room click closed.

"Where is everyone?" Ben asked, his voice a little louder now that they were behind closed doors.

"I think everyone is napping. Eddie went to work and I think Bill ran some errands." Bev replied. Mike looked to Stan, still breathing softly in his bed.

"Oh," Ben sighed, and there was a chilled moment of silence. "So, um, what's up?" The words were informal, Ben was nervous.

"I just uh..." Beverly's voice trembled. "I wanted to talk to you. About the uh... the marriage thing." Mike strained to her voice lowered at the end.

Ben inhaled sharply. "Yeah, absolutely."

There was the sound of the springs in the bed creaking, Beverly had sat down on it.

There were a few more moments of silence. Mike could hear Stan's watch ticking from across the room, the rain failing to drown out its cadence.

Ben spoke finally. "Babe, I never..." A pause. "I never wanted you to think this was the only option. I love you. So fucking much and I just want you to be happy."

He heard her snuffle. "I know," she said quietly.

"And if that means that we don't get married now, or ever...as long as you're with me, I don't care what happens. I don't." He was walking towards her. "Marriage or not we are partners. And I know that shit

with your dad -"

"Ben," she said quickly.

"No, please," he replied. "I know that shit with your dad was rough, fucking awful, really. But I would never, ever, do anything to hurt you. And if kids ever became a thing, I would protect them - you all - with my life." Mike's heart rate jumped up at the idea of Ben and Beverly having kids. He looked at Stan again, who had rolled over now, and he felt soft.

"Ben," Beverly started. "I love you very, very much. I just...I get so fucking scared. I am so terrified sometimes." Mike wondered if they were holding hands.

"I know, baby girl, I know. I don't want you to ever feel afraid with me." Ben sat on the bed, more spring squeaking.

"I just need to wait a little." Bev said.

Ben was quiet for a moment and Mike pondered if maybe one of them was crying.

"Beverly Anne, I would wait a hundred years to marry you if that's what you wanted."

Bev laughed. "Well," she said. "Maybe not a hundred years."

Ben laughed now too. "Not long enough?"

They both chuckled now, Beverly sniffing. "Maybe till we're thirty or something, I dunno." There was the soft crackling sound of a kiss. Mike could not stifle a smile that took his lips. "Ask me again in five years." Beverly finished.

Another kiss, the springs groaning under shifted weight. "Let me write it down in my calendar. July 18, 2022, 'Ask Bev to marry you again'." She giggled, the sound hoarse in her throat.

There was the rapid sound of more kisses, and then, "I love you Ben."

"I love you too, Beverly." More kissing, then the sound of ragged



panting, and Mike took that as his cue to stop eavesdropping. Things would be okay again.

The Losers were a full family once again.

July came to an end, the stark summer heat blanketing the city with its heavy aroma. The Losers continued their days working and going out together, coming home at night to have dinner with one another or going out on the weekends to the quarry to swim.

Audra had been coming around a lot more, they all noticed giddily. They could tell when she was coming because Bill went into a fury of cleaning the house, making sure all of the dishes were cleaned and put away, the refrigerator stocked full to the brim with more than just leftovers and condiments, the couch cushions just so in their respective homes. He even went so far as to make all of the Losers clean their rooms, not that it mattered much for Stan or Eddie or Mike, but with Richie the affair was like pulling teeth.

"I just don't see why I have to get ready for your girlfriend to come over." Richie said in the shadow of his bedroom, kicking a pile of dirty clothes towards the closet. "Not like I'll be going down on her."

Bill held back his "beep beep". "She's not my girlfriend."

Eddie, who was sprawled out on Richie's bed reading a tattered copy of *Leaves of Grass*, groaned audibly and rolled onto his side, resting his hand under his chin. "Bill if you guys aren't dating then why the hell is she eating all our food?"

Bill threw his hands up. "She doesn't eat all of the food!"

Richie and Eddie made eyes at each other and Richie scoffed. "Yea, Eds, dick is part of the five food groups and she ain't gobbling up this co-"

"Beep beep, Richie, Jesus." Eddie said, covering his face in horror.

"I'm just saying," Bill continued, ignoring the disgusting commentary. "What if she goes into the wrong room or something, and she sees this clusterfuck?" He gestured at the mess on the ground.

Richie too gestured at the room. "It's mah clusterfuck," he said with a southern accent. "And ah a-love it so, Big Billy Boy! Uh ah say, it's mah mess and I'll a-keep it!"

Eddie and Bill both rolled their eyes at this. His voices had got better as the years ran on but that didn't make them any less odious.

"Please, Rich, just like, do your laundry or something."

"But that means I have to go into the basement and it's creeeeepyyyy." Richie whined.

Eddie set his book down and got up from the bed, putting his arm up on Richie's shoulder. It was difficult for him, the other being so much taller. "I'll help you Rich."

Bill dropped his hand to his thighs, sighing relieved. "Thank you."

Richie snickered and tickled into Eddie's side. "Ooooh, Eds, is this your way of saying you wanna do something slutty?"

Eddie shoved him away and began to gather up swooping armfuls of clothes. "Fuck off."

Bill went to go, watching briefly as Richie's eyes lingered on Eddie. Strange.

The rest of the house was easy, picking up old beer bottles, organizing the magazines on the coffee table, opening windows to let in fresh air.

Audra came around six that night, joining Bill, Mike, Stan, Eddie, and the newly rekindled Ben and Beverly for dinner. Richie was at one of his numerous jobs and wasn't be able to join them. They had Chinese takeout, spread out in the living room watching Game of Thrones on the television.

Bill studied her while she ate next to him, carefully placing chopstickfuls of lo mein into her mouth. Her lips were a soft pink, soy sauce staining the bottom one. He hadn't kissed her yet, and he wondered what it would be like to do so.

Whenever he got a call or text from her, his spirits soared. He had never felt this way about anyone before - he had had a crush on Beverly when they were younger but he knew not long after she and Ben became official that it was just sore puppy love. He worried he might be falling in love with her. It only worried him because he hadn't kissed her, so how could he even know if the electricity was there on their mouths the way it was when they brushed arms or held hands. She was beautiful, it was true, long brown hair that glinted red in the sunshine, blue eyes that reminded him of the shallows in the quarry. But she was smart too.

They had driven up to the University of Maine to go to the art museum there and they had putzed around hand-in-hand, her pointing at the photographs or paintings and talking excitedly about them, and all he could do was watch her talk. Her voice was melodious to him, like a song that only he knew the words to. He should have kissed her then, right in front of Tim by Keliy Anderson-Staley, gently holding her hand and pressing with a maddening passion against her. But he hadn't. They had walked away from the portrait to another part of the museum, where she excitedly went on about abstract monuments and the validity of Jackson Pollock.

She loved art and the stars and her mother and her older brother and baby sister. She sent him photographs of drawings she did, little doodles in the corner of her notebooks or full sketches in the black leather bound sketchbook she had received for Christmas one year. She told him she wanted to be an actress, like Audrey Hepburn, or perhaps even Charlize Theron. He told her about his writing and the Losers and his mother and father and Georgie.

He told her, trying to keep his voice from catching repeatedly in the infamous stutter, about the accident. How it had been late September, and his grandmother's birthday had just passed and they went to a dinner at her house up near Bangor. How the sun had set on the way back and a chill had set in. How Georgie was sleeping soundly behind his father driving, his small hand reached out for Bill's only slightly larger one, palm up, fingers curled in. How they had come up at a four way intersection with a stop sign on two of the sides, and they'd pulled to a stop. How Bill had been beginning to doze off, having tried to stay awake the whole car ride just to see if

he could do it. How they'd stopped, waited the appropriate three or four seconds, and his father had gently tapped on the gas. How suddenly the car was exploding it seemed, thrown to the right with a sickening twist of metal and flashing sparks. How Bill was suddenly very awake and screaming and crying and snot running over his mouth. How his head slammed against the back passenger window, cracking the glass and making his scalp bleed. His mother tossed and four of her ribs broken. His father's collarbone dislocated and internal bleeding.

But Georgie. His Georgie. He had taken the brunt of the impact it seemed, his head had been leaning against the door for balance, and the man, drunk three times over the limit and not having turned his headlights on, was going 50 in a 30, and he kept going even after initially hitting the van, buckling the left side in on itself, and ultimately, little Georgie Denbrough.

It was said by the coroner that he died almost immediately, his neck having snapped or his organs crushed, Bill couldn't remember. He had a hard time piecing what had gone on in those weeks immediately after the accident, but he remembered for sure he was laid out in a hospital bed for at least two of them, being monitored to see if his brain would swell anymore, and when the swelling started going down, how it would effect him. Would he be able to walk? Would he be able to speak? Would he be blind?

He could walk, shakily for a while, but he did nonetheless. He could see, though his vision was blurry for a month or so. And he could speak, sure, but now he had this...stutter.

It was terrible at first - he couldn't go three or four words without his tongue catching on them, sentences as simple as, "I miss my brother," turned into slobbering messes of, "Uh-uh-I ma-ma-miss my b-b-bruh-bruh-" and he would not be able to go on anymore. It was worse with his parents. Where he needed anything they could give, a hand to hold, or a shoulder to cry on, or just someone to sit in absolute silence with, they could not be bothered. It was as if, Bill thought, Georgie had been the glue holding the family together. And now that he was gone and Bill was damaged goods, his parents didn't want to be parents anymore. But the Losers had been with him, cradling him as he cried, drinking with him when he wanted to self medicate,

coming to the funeral and all of them holding hands in one long line.

That was back when he was ten and the feeling had dragged with him up until he was maybe seventeen, and he started getting college brochures. One day he was sitting in the kitchen, looking over the course catalogue for University of Maine to see what creative writing classes they offered, scribbling notes and possibilities into a small spiral notebook. His mother had come into the room quietly, not speaking to him as she placed a glass in the sink. He didn't look at her, he just assumed she would ignore him anyway. But she had lingered at the sink and he looked up to find her watching him. He looked around without moving his head, pen poised between his fingertips.

"Y-yes?" He had asked. The stutter was better now, but still a prevalent part of his identity.

She was frowning, tired eyes and more crow's feet than he had ever realized. Her hair was starting to fall silver around the crown of her head. He felt terrible for not having noticed but pushed the feeling aside as he remembered the last time he'd actually spoken to her had been almost two months ago.

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

He set down the pen and folded his hands in front of him, waiting.

She swallowed hard, looking at the linoleum. "You've been getting college stuff." She said, her voice vacant and hoarse.

He looked at the brochures and catalogues spread out in front of him. There were six different schools worth of information here - University of Maine, NYU, Stanford, California State University, Harvard for shits and giggles, and one called University of Missouri Kansas City that he had looked at on a whim. He wasn't sure which he wanted to go to, if any at all. He had a hard time thinking about the future right now.

He nodded, but didn't speak. He was worried he would start stuttering more.

"Anywhere good?" She asked and sat at the table. He shrugged, not wanting to put too much effort into this conversation. She didn't really care, he wasn't sure why she was pretending all of a sudden. She made it clear how she felt about her oldest and now only son.

She looked at her fingers again, the frown returning. "Bill, I -" she paused.

He waited, only sort of impatiently.

She looked up at him again, tears flooding her eyes now. His heart seized and he wanted to comfort her, tears drawing behind his eyelashes as well. Nothing could make him cry like seeing his own mother cry.

"Bill, I can't deal with the things I've done to you these last few years. I just can't deal with it. You'll be leaving soon and I -" Her voice broke and tears began to slide down her cheeks, drawing lines in her foundation. Bill was crying fully too, his bottom lip trembling, but it was all involuntary. He didn't want to hear this. He didn't want to hear these lies. This sudden remorse.

"Mom," he choked, brow furrowed, and she held up a hand.

"After Geor...after your brother died, I was broken. Your father and I could barely keep our heads above water and..."

He cut her off, his face soaked with tears. He stood abruptly, nearly knocking back his chair. He was sobbing now, angry, trying to choke back the knot in his throat. "Y-y-you don't get to s-s-say anything to m-me. You were so b-b-busy mourning G-G-Georgie that you didn't realize I was d-drowning too! My own b-brother, mom! I needed you and dad and you were nowhere to be found! Now you suddenly want to apologize? Seven years later? I can't deal with it either. It kills me every day. So don't f-fucking pretend now you're interested in what I'm doing. Just fucking d-don't."

He had hurriedly gathered up all of the pamphlets and papers and stormed out of the room, throwing his things into his backpack, zipping up some of the edges of paper in the process of closing it, and went outside, climbed on top of Silver, and rode towards the Barrens.

He called the others on the ride there and when he arrived, Ben, Mike, and Stan were waiting for him. Richie and Eddie arrived soon after, and they called Beverly, leaving her on speaker as they listened to Bill relay the story. After he explained it, they had sat in silence, all reaching out a hand, touching Bill's skin. That was six years ago.

When he told Audra about all this, leaving out the extra details, she too had reached out and touched Bill, squeezing up his hand. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

And now, here they sat, everyone piled in front the television, Audra letting her knee graze up against the outside of his thigh and laughing anytime Stan made a comment about historical accuracy. She and Eddie were fawning over Jon Snow, her tapping Eddie on the shoulder and they giggled, heads close together. She and Beverly were talking about the weaponry and fight scenes, in awe over the details they had seen in the extras after the episodes.

She leaned over Bill to set down the empty lo mein container on the side table. She smelled like rosemary, and interesting herb to smell like Bill thought, but it seemed all of a sudden rosemary was the most beautiful thing in the history of the planet. He could swim in rosemary. Her cheek was inches from his nose, and she had a coy smile on her face, looking up at him out of the corner of her eye. Kiss her you idiot, fucking kiss her. But she sat back and again, his chance was lost.

Later that night, around ten, the others had gone to bed and the two of them lay on Bill's full-sized mattress, watching Netflix on his phone. Audra's eyes were starting to cower in sleepyness and she stifled a yawn with the back of her hand.

Bill looked at her. "You tired?" He asked, pausing the video.

She rolled over, pulling her arms up so they rested between her chest and his arm, nuzzling her nose down into his shirt sleeve. "A little."

He frowned a little. He just wanted to spend more time pressed up next to her breathing her in, listening to her laugh at John Mulaney, feeling the warm burning of her skin against his. But he quickly pushed the grimace away and smiled softly at her. He knew he would

see her again soon. "I can drive you home if you want?"

He set the phone on the bedside table and went to get up. She put a hand on his arm to stop him and he turned, locking eyes with her. Hers were blue, nothing but blue, the type of blue that could swallow you whole, leave you gasping for air, icy cold wolf eyes. Her face was blank, looking for reaction in his.

He felt his heart quicken to a rabbit's beat across a woodland meadow. "Yeah?" He said.

"Or," she started, running a finger down his arm. "I could just stay the night here?"

He stopped breathing then, he thought. Perhaps he misunderstood her? Or he was already asleep and this was a dream? It was such a silly notion that this could be a dream but god she was so gorgeous and he was just William Denbrough, the kid with the stutter and the dead brother who was too chicken-shit to kiss this girl he thought he may be falling in love with.

He swallowed. "H-here?" Fucking stutter, he thought, just fuck off.

She nodded, smiling. It was a gentle smile, one without probing or indifference.

He laughed and looked at the wall. What was she asking? Oh my god, what was she asking.

"If you'd like. I-I can set myself something up on the floor or downstairs and you can sleep here." He suggested, always a gentleman.

She breathed out her nose in a laugh and rolled up onto her hands, her legs folded out in front of her.

"Bill, what are you doing?" She asked, her voice only slightly frustrated.

He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. "Honestly," he laughed. "I have no fucking idea." He couldn't look at her, very shy all of a sudden.



She crawled up so she sat behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck, her chin resting on his shoulder. He could barely breathe he was so filled with nerves, but he placed a trembling hand on her forearm.

"Bill, you know that I like you, right?" Bill pondered for a moment and then nodded, pressing his mouth blankly against the skin of her arm.

"I know you like me too. So my real question is," she turned his chin to look at her, "Why the fuck haven't you kissed me yet?"

They sat in hot tense silence for a moment, looking from one another's eyes to their mouths and back and forth. After what felt like an eternity, Bill twisted, coming up on the bed and folding his knees up underneath him. She could probably hear his heart it was beating so loud, and he was sweating. He'd kissed girls before, this was no different.

But it was different. This was Audra Phillips.

Her cream colored face was centimeters from his now, her breath sweet like cotton candy. Her eyelashes dusted across her cheeks. He had one of her hands wrapped up in his fingers and she had the other on his hip. He inhaled deeply and whispered, "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

She giggled and replied, "Because you're a good man."

Her mouth fluttered open slightly and they closed the space between the two of them, and there was nothing but electricity. At first, with the initial kiss, it was static, the kiss itself soft and tender, a press and then a smaller one after. Bill's eyes jumped open as she pushed further, drawing herself up onto his lap. Then it was like direct lightening had punched him dead in the face and they were moving against one another in perfect synchronization, hands in hair, Audra's legs wrapping around his waist, panting into his mouth. It was fire on the delicate skin of his lips, and he was laying her down on the bed, pushing his hands up to flatten the pillow for her head to rest on. They broke apart again, a guttural sound emitting from his throat without permission and she smiled, kissing him more. Their tongues

touched tentatively, and then harder, Bill's stomach filling with a burning he was going to associate with lust. She pushed her hands up into his shirt, long thin fingers soft. He gasped a little and too put a hand under her's, on the skin of her stomach. She pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor and kissing his collarbone.

She pulled away from his throat, gasping, lips practically purple, and said in a husky voice, "Could we play some music?"

Bill nodded, reaching fumbling over to the bedside clock, pushing over the knob to set it on radio. A song he'd heard but could not recall the name of was playing, a sweet cautious melody, and he thanked whatever gods there were out there that it wasn't something awful.

When he had moved away slightly I turn on the radio, she had taken her shirt off too, wearing a small black bra that cupped her breasts just so. He looked at her in awe, his mind racing with the serendipity of it all and moved himself down, kissing the soft skin at the top of her chest. She had one of her hands in his hair, the other raking the top of his back with her curtly cut fingernails. He was moaning now into her chest, struggling to move his hands under her to unclasp the bra. She was making this sound - god it was driving him crazy! - between a moan and a whine and he stiffened in his jeans. He wasn't going to do anything she didn't want, he wanted it to be right, but if she wanted to, he was willing. She folded her arms behind her back and undid the bra, sliding the straps off her shoulders with a shrug and shoving it to the floor. He brought himself up on his knees and just looked at her for a second. Not just her breasts, that would have been obvious, but all of her. He watched her eyes and they were shining as she tried to catch her breath, and he let his own travel down her. Her breasts were small, probably a handful worth each and her belly button was pierced. He laughed. She didn't seem like she would have had a belly button piercing. The idea struck him as incredible - a piercing - and he continued to look down her, falling to the place where her hips met the front of his pants. She had pushed her hands to the front of her own pants and was undoing the button. He caught her eye, panting.

"What do you want to do?"

She bit her lip, sliding her pants down past her knees and Bill took the initiative to stand and pull them the rest of the way off. She was wearing black underwear that matched her bra - perhaps on purpose - and he set a gentle kiss on the hem of them. She gasped.

"What do you want to do?" She gave back, pulling his shoulders gently so they could look each other in the face again. He rested on his elbow and brushed the hair of her bangs from her forehead.

Bill laughed, touching their noses together. "We're gonna keep running around like this all night." She laughed too and held his face.

"I'd be more than ok with taking the rest of our clothes off and going all the way." Her voice was confident and that only made him want her more. They kissed again, softer now than like the past few minutes, and he undid the button of his jeans with his free hand. She waited, patient, her eyes low and smoky.

He couldn't believe this was happening, this was too perfect, here she was, lying underneath him, kissing and touching and god he was falling in love with her, really falling, he could tell, and it wasn't just the fact that she was half naked, god no, though of course it could completely seem that way, but everything was perfect, they were completely swept up in -

"Alright ladies and gents that was James Arthur's Say You Won't Let Go which is sappy as hell but it's what gets the ladies going -" Oh my god. It was fucking Richie. "Speaking of getting the ladies going I want to give a huuuuuge shoutout to my man Big Billy D, who, according to my other roommates is about to seal the deal with an actual human lady, who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty. But you know who you is, sweetie. Now Bill -" He shoved his face in his hands, turning beet red. "Normally in this situation I'd blast a very specific Peaches song, but I was informed just yesterday that I have to cut back on my use of the 'fuck' word. So tonight, you're gonna just have to settle for -" Bill slammed the radio switch to off so fast he knocked the clock between the bed and the nightstand, absolutely mortified. He was frozen for a moment, and then leaned back onto his legs, pants still unbuttoned and held a hand over his mouth. It was over now. There's no way she would be okay with that. She would storm out, snatching up her clothes and curse at him, say she

never wanted to see him again, and that would be that. Bill made a mental note to punch Richie so hard in the crotch that he couldn't walk for five days and he looked down at her.

She had both hands covering her mouth, staring at the ceiling. Her arms had covered up her chest, her legs still bowed around where he sat. He opened his mouth to apologize profusely but she interrupted him.

She started laughing. It started out muffled from behind her fingers but soon the sound was booming out of her chest, side-splitting peals of laughter that were so hearty that tears began to pour from the outside corner of her eyes and she rolled on her side, holding her stomach and practically cackling.

The sound made Bill chuckle, then start to full-on laugh too, his abdomen beginning to ache from the action, and he fell on his back and laughed at the ceiling. Goddamn Richie Tozier.

After maybe five minutes, their guffaws began to die down, and he felt her hand press into his.

They lay there in silence for a moment, only the sounds of their slowing breathing taking hold.

"I am so sorry." Bill said, a small smile taking his mouth.

She looked at him from where she lay, her at the top of the bed and he at the bottom. She shook her head, hair falling in her face, and she moved it back behind her ear. "Don't be, that was gold. I've never been talked about on the radio before. Feel kind of famous." She rolled around on the bed until she could rest her chin against his shoulder, kissing it.

"I'd say let's keep going but now I feel like they're watching us." She said and Bill nodded, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

"I completely understand. I could kill him right now." He said. They hunkered down closer together and closed their eyes.

"Audra," Bill said after a moment.

"Hmm?" She murmured, beginning to fall asleep.

"Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

She didn't speak for a minute and he thought she may have fallen asleep. But then she nodded her nose against his arm, smiling and giggling.

"Absolutely."

He took up her hand and kissed it. "Good."

She pressed her forehead to his chin and then kissed him there. "And with this -" she waved her hand over their nakedness, "We can take a little timeout. We've got all the time in the world."

Bill snorted, his eyes starting to flutter closed. "Yeah. A timeout is good. I want everything to be perfect."

She was breathing slower now, sleep nearly consuming her. "Everything is perfect."

## 4. Chapter 4: Richie Tozier Takes a Powder

Dead August heat rolled through the hills rising and falling along Derry's borders. School was restarting, kids and young adults alike swarming the stores to get last minute supplies and running wild in the streets as the sun soaked season came to a close. The dog days were far from over, however, and the house was sweating.

Bill had got a job at the high school teaching literature and creative writing. He got the call giving him the job sometime in July. He had become so overwhelmed with excitement that he had grabbed onto the closest thing in range - Stan's arm - and squeezed and shook it, all the while Stan smiling broadly and saying, "What is it girl? Is Timmy trapped in a well?"

When he'd hung up, he ran his hands through his hair, eyes wide and crazed and he laughed with such a feeling that Stan couldn't help but laugh with him. "I got the fucking job!" He screamed, sweeping Stan up into a hug and spinning him around. Stan held on tightly, so goddamned proud of his best friend. They'd gone out to the Brickyard - where Bev worked - and celebrated by having too much to drink.

But Bill was also somewhat let down that the school year was starting back up - that meant Audra was leaving Derry again. She'd been staying up at the Flagg house over the summer but reality was setting in and things had to go back to the way they were before. That meant Audra had NYU and Bill had Derry.

He had driven her to the airport, Mike and Beverly loading up behind them to take the drive. They knew Bill wouldn't want to be alone on the drive home. When they got to the loading-and-unloading-of-passengers-only zone, Bill got out, grabbing her suitcase and lugging it to the curb, biting back tears. He didn't know why he wanted to cry, it wasn't like he'd never see her again. They'd had a detailed discussion on how long distance relationships could go. Bill was worried she'd find someone smarter, more handsome, better than he, and he told her so. They sat with their foreheads pressed together in the backyard, fingers interlaced, discussing everything.

"Bill," she said quietly. "I don't think you have anything to worry

about."

He looked at her, confused. "How so?" She had smiled, perfect pink lips curling at the edges.

"I think we've passed the falling stage and are straight up in love is all." She kissed him gently on the mouth and he had taken her face in his hands, shaking a little.

And now she was going away. They'd decided to go for it, to be in love from far away. They would FaceTime whenever they could, text constantly, and Audra even suggested they could write letters. Then on the breaks they could fly up and visit. Audra even suggested he come spend Christmas with her family, which he was more than okay with considering how quiet his own home was around the holidays. They had spent the night together just before her flight, and finally, as Richie had so eloquently put it over the radio waves not weeks ago, "sealed the deal", making love to the setting sun and a special playlist Ben had provided.

"You got everything?" Bill said to her as she adjusted her purse strap over her shoulder, hair in a messy bun on top of her head.

She hmmm'd and counted something off on her hand. "Yes, I think so," she dug through her purse briefly and nodded as she confirmed whatever she was looking for was inside. "Yea, all set."

They stared sadly at each other for a long minute until an airport attendant said to them sternly, "Alright we need to move it along."

Bill glared at him and then Audra wrapped her arms around his chest, pressing up into his back and clutching his shirt. He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her tightly.

When she said it at first, he didn't quite hear her, her face muffled into his chest. "Hmm?" He said, his heart beginning to race for some reason. The attendant was coming their way again but he couldn't go without hearing what she had to say, he had to hear it.

"I said I love you, Bill." She said looking up at him and his heart burst in his chest a hundred times over. He couldn't stop smiling, all he

could feel was this deep burning sensation that took to his lungs and made his legs feel like rubber.

His stutter started to choke up again as he sputtered out, "I-I love you t-too, Audra." And he had taken her face in his hands and kissed her so hard their teeth rattled together, Beverly and Mike hollering from the car, Mike reaching up to the front seat and honking the horn a few times.

The attendant was next to them again, starting to say something and Bill held a hand out to shut him up - "Yeah, yeah move it along, we got it." He kissed her once more and ran to the driver's seat, beaming like a kid who just got the best gift in the world for Christmas.

"I love you, Audra Phillips!" He called as she walked towards the sliding doors.

"And I love you William Denbrough!" She said, turning and cupping her hands around her mouth like a megaphone.

Bill got in the car and slammed the door. Bev and Mike were screaming at him, "YOU SAID IT YOU SAID THE LOVE WORD OH MY GOD!" A train's length of cars had piled up in the turning lane behind him but Bill didn't even notice. He was on the moon, completely head over heels in love with that damn girl.

The other Losers were taking the end of the summer in stride, trying their best to get in everything the season had to offer before the air chilled and the leaves began to twist and fall into the dirt. Stan and Eddie planned a group outing to the quarry, complete with a picnic and maybe a small bonfire - Stan didn't seem to think they could get away with it, but Ben personally didn't see why not. He could build a makeshift fire pit, scraping some dirt into a wide circle on the tiny substitute beach and surround it with rocks. Richie said quietly, "Smores?" And Bev had nodded vigorously.

They went down on a Tuesday afternoon, packing up sandwiches, homemade potato salad - Stan's recipe - hot dogs, some beer, chocolate pudding - they assumed, that was Richie's contribution - some other snacks, and all the fixings for Smores. Mike and Ben set to building the fire pit, the others stripping their clothes from sticky



sweaty bodies and going for a swim.

By the time they had finished the pit, a three foot round groove in the sand with a small makeshift wall stacked up shin high with flatter-sitting stones, the others were ready to eat. Mike stacked kindling and yellowed grass on top of one another in a teepee fashion and lit it using Bev's purple lighter. It burned up slowly, starting as a thick grey smoke that made Eddie cough before it grew into a full on flame, crackling and spitting as Bill and Ben roasted hot dogs. The sky was clear, no clouds blocking out the raging sun to protect their skin. Eddie insisted on slathering everyone of them in what felt like a gallon of sunscreen each, Mike making a comment about needing it the most while Richie said he'd rather burn than wear what he was going to henceforth refer to as "Sun-Repellant-Semen," to which Eddie replied, "Beep beep, Rich."

The sun baked them from overhead, Beverly laying out on a yellow towel with her heart shaped sunglasses on. She chatted with Richie about the radio gig, pulling a cigarette to her lips occasionally and taking a drag.

Eddie and Bill were talking about the teaching position - Eddie, for some reason, was upset that he no longer had to go to school.

"I went for nearly two decades of my life and now I have nothing to do!" He cried.

Stan and Mike, sitting with their knees touching, looked at him incredulously. "Why is that an issue? You have an adult job now!" Stan said, stretching his legs out in front of him to dry near the fire.

Eddie shrugged. "I dunno. I guess it was just nice to have something to do. I always had tests to study for or notes to look over. Now I feel stagnant."

They understood, even if they didn't feel the same. There was something familiar to them of the halls of the Derry public school system, something like home. Even if they didn't always like it or feel safe there - thank you Henry Bowers - it was where they all started to become friends.

Richie tossed the remainder of his cigarette in the fire and exhaled the smoke, his mouth a small 'o'. He went and sat next to Eddie, more on top of him than next to really, taking him under his arm. Eddie let it rest there, sighing in anticipation of whatever crude or ridiculous thing was about to come out of his mouth.

"I feel you Eddie. And if you'd like, later tonight, you can feel me." The group groaned. It was like he wasn't even trying anymore.

Beverly laughed and sat up, digging her fingertips into the sand. "Rich you are one bad joke away from getting punched in the dick, I swear."

Bill stood abruptly, remembering, and shouted, "Oh yeah!" And he made a rush at Richie, who tumbled backwards over the rock he had been sitting on and hopped up, running towards the water.

"Fuck you and the horse you road in on, Richard Tozier!" He screamed, laughing as Richie dived poorly into the quarry, Bill splashing in behind him. Beverly and Stan joined next, Mike, Ben, and Eddie watching, shaking their heads.

They went home around 7, the sun beginning to come down from its peak at the top of the sky. They had all ridden along in Beverly's jeep, piled arms and legs on top of one another. Ben had his arm laced over the armrest, Bev's hand resting on top of it. Bill was stuck in next to Eddie and Richie on his other side, Stan and Mike in the back. Bill looked over at Eddie, who was passed out, his head laying on Richie's shoulder, his legs pulled up and kneeling Richie in the chest. Richie had placed his arm around his shoulders, snuggling him in tightly to his body. He was staring out the window, a small smile on his face.

Bill watched them for a moment, pondering the situation. It wasn't terribly strange, he thought; Richie had always been affectionate with Eddie, even moreso than with Bev or Stan.

There were several different dynamics that took place inside the Losers Club, something Beverly had once called, "Platonic Couplehood."

There was Ben and Beverly, clearly connected by their relationship status. But Bev and Richie were closer than close, connecting over their families and smoking habits. Then Richie had Stan, and they were the type of best friends to roast each other but then fight to the teeth anyone who got in their way. There was also Richie and Eddie, who had a sort of flirty friendship. Which really meant Richie flirted and Eddie complained about it. Stan was close with Bill, Richie, and Mike. He and Mike both loved animals and they were often hanging out birdwatching in the park or down at the Barrens. Stan and Bill were close like brothers, with Stanley being the younger of the two Bill felt it necessary to keep watch over him. Sometimes it felt like Stan was holding things back, but like a good elder brother, Bill didn't push the issue. Mike was also close with Ben, bonding over their love of math and literature, of blooming spring trees and the taste of rhubarb pie. Mike was also close to Beverly after they had a heart to heart on the bleachers after school one day. They knew more about one another than they let on. Eddie had Richie, of course, but Bill was his best-best friend. Bill had been placed next to Eddie on the first day of kindergarten and from there their friendship was a deal sealed in blood.

They were all thick as thieves, but there were some portions of their lives the others didn't know. For a moment Bill felt a twinge of jealousy somewhere in the pit of his stomach, but he buried it.

"Rich," he whispered so as not to wake Eddie. He was a mouthbreathing sleeper, completely surrendered to what took him under and glued him to whatever was closest to him, whether that be a pillow, blankets, or in this case, Richie.

Richie turned and his smile wavered briefly, as if it had been completely unintentional. He nodded at him.

Bill pointed a finger quickly between he and Eddie, smiling wildly. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, "Is something going on here?"

Richie pulled his classic smirk, one corner of his mouth curving the dimple in his cheek. "A gentleman never kisses and tells," he replied, looking back out the window.

"And when have you ever been a gentleman?" Mike chuckled, Stan

slapping him lightly on the arm.

Richie, turning so that his hair flipped over his shoulder, gave Mike a shit-eating grin. "Shit, you fucking right." He brought up his free hand to bump fists with him, Stan and Bill rolling their eyes.

Bill caught Richie looking up at the rear view mirror, blinking slowly and nodding. In the reflection, Beverly and he were making eye contact, strong and dedicated.

When they arrived home, twilight had begun to settle, the sky a mix of violets and pinks. Mike carried a sleeping Eddie halfway to the door before he woke up, squirming in Mike's arms. "Put me down, dude, I have legs!"

They had all laughed as Eddie straightened his sweatshirt and walked proudly up the steps as if he hadn't just been up in strong arms bridal style. Richie and Beverly fell back, lighting cigarettes. Bill stopped momentarily too, looking at Richie as he watched Eddie go up inside, followed by Stan, Mike, and Ben. Bill wanted to join them, even ask for a cigarette himself perhaps to be able to join the conversation, when his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Audra, and he took the opportunity to push away his doubt once more by answering it. Doubt, he wondered, was that the right word? Or maybe moreover an absent feeling, like he was missing out on some big grand thing. Something was coming. He just didn't know what.

Eddie yawned, pulling the back of his fist to his mouth. He was sprawled out on Richie's bed, the blankets pulled up around his legs. Stan and Richie were playing Battlefront on the tiny television, Stan clearly beating Richie with his CGI Luke Skywalker.

"You're fucking cheating!" Richie cried, elbowing Stan in the ribs.

He laughed. "How the hell could I cheat! I'm better than you, just admit it!"

"No way, you're playing as a terrorist!" He replied.

Eddie joined Stan in laughing this time, and Richie turned to look at him. He almost forgotten he was there he had been so engrossed in

the game.

"How are the rebels terrorists, Rich? They just want freedom like everyone else."

Richie scoffed. "They blew up the Freedom Star, Edward. There were families and shit living there. Regular Joes. The dudes who cleaned toilets got blown up, too."

He watched Eddie's face, his mouth moving silently as he explained something, but he couldn't hear it. He was suddenly too caught up in the soft curves and jagged peaks of his face. The way his hair, so fucking curly goddamn, licked the top of his ears and swept across his forehead. Deep set chocolate eyes that glittered whenever he talked to him, set above a spattering of light freckles over his nose and cheekbones. He watched his lips, which always seemed like they were in a perpetual smirk, well at least whenever he was talking to Richie. They were so over-moisturized, something Richie liked to tease him about, threatening to press his own chapped ones against them. Something purred inside Richie's stomach, a slowly growing ache that he didn't recognize.

"...and the Empire is literally based off fascist Nazi Germany." Eddie finished whatever he was saying.

Richie shook his head, coming back down. "Uhh..." he said, trying to remember what the hell was just said.

"Literally in the room with a Jew, Trashmouth. Try not to say anything too fucking stupid." Stan said, staring slack jawed at the tv, still killing Stormtroopers and other Imperial bad guys.

Richie pursed his lips at Stan. "I wasn't saying anything like that, besides you're not even really that Jewy. And anyways, y'all know I'm a fucking slut for Organa."

Stan snorted. "Senator or General?"

"Yes." Richie replied.

He turned and winked at Eddie. And for the first time in maybe forever, Eddie didn't roll his eyes or look away. Instead, he laughed,

the sound bell-like, and held his eyes for a very long time. It was Richie who finally looked away, blush taking to his cheeks and the purr growing.

The feeling made him nauseous, it was new and unexpected, and he couldn't help but think maybe he was getting food poisoning. Why did Eddie look at him like that? Why didn't he look away? He usually looked away when Richie said stupid shit. Or he gave back something to get him to shut up. Not this time, and it drove Richie to smile at his controller, glasses sliding down his nose.

For what may have been the first time in his 23 years, Richie Tozier was absolutely speechless, one thought swimming in his mind.

Eddie Kaspbrak hadn't looked away.

He stood trembling outside the room, drumming his fingers on his legs. His heart was beating steadily in his ears, and he exhaled to steady himself. He just had to do it.

Richie banged the side of his fist against Beverly's door, trying to catch his breath. Why the fuck was he so nervous? Shit, why was he being so formal? He should have just stormed in and said everything running through his mind.

"Yeah?" Beverly's voice came from inside.

"It's me," his voice cracked and he felt like a thirteen year old boy once more, legs shaking as he shot up and voice splitting every other syllable.

"Uh, come in?" And he did before she'd even finished her sentence.

She was laying on her stomach on the bed, her laptop lighting up her face in the dim room. Ben wasn't there, and for that he was thankful.

"Why the fuck did you knock?" She said laughing and rolled up so her legs were crossed in front of her. She watched him. He'd started to pace in front of her, shoving his index and middle fingers into his mouth to gnaw at the skin on the edges of his fingernails.

"Bev I gotta tell you something and you can't say anything to anyone,

okay?" He ignored her question, not even looking at her, he could only focus on the spots directly in front of his feet. His chest was heaving over all of it, and he couldn't decide exactly where he wanted to start.

She was watching him patiently, following his movement with eyebrows pulled down over her blue eyes. "Rich, you okay?"

He nodded and then paused in front of her, his long fingers pressed together as if in a prayer. He pulled the tops of his fingers to his lips, took a deep breath and pointed them back to her.

"I think I'm falling in love with Eddie." He let the words hang in the air between them like a fog. He took a catcher's stance and covered his mouth with both hands, the fraying cloth bracelet he wore on his wrist brushing up against the semblance of stubble on his chin. He wanted to vomit, not that anything would come up besides bile - he'd been so caught up in thinking about this, how he would tell her this to see if he was insane, that he'd forgotten to eat. It'd been almost a week since Eddie hadn't looked away and the confusion of it had been eating away at him since then, especially awful today. He had just putzed around his room, laying on the bed, sitting uncomfortably in the armchair, folding himself up in the pile of clothes outside his closet, chainsmoking, and then in a panic, all the stress building up until he felt like he was suffocating, he had cleaned his room, throwing all the clothes into the cracked laundry basket he brought from home and taken them down to the basement to wash. He had organized the desk, opened the windows on the hot afternoon to let in fresh air, emptied his ashtray into the trash can, then tossed in all the empty Dorito bags, old Mountain Dew cans, a magazine that he'd spilled a glass of orange juice on and was no longer openable. He had stolen the broom and dustpan from the kitchen closet and swept the whole room, even going so far as to push the broom under the bed to grab anything he'd missed prior. He'd made the bed, folded and hung up the clothes as appropriate, laid on the newly made bed for 45 minutes and then went to her door and now here he was, waiting for her to respond.

She didn't say anything, she was just looking at him. Her face hadn't changed, she was biting the inside of her cheek and staring with soft eyes.

Richie put his hands out to say, "So?"

She exhaled slowly through her nose, closing her laptop.

"Babes," she said quietly. "You've been in love with him for a while."

He stared at her, his mouth having fallen open. "The fuck?"

She got up from the bed, sweatpants and bare feet and went to the window, grabbing up her smokes and offering him one. He took it gratefully. He'd smoked the remainder of his own pack in his room not long before he came over here. They each lit the cigarettes - yellow American Spirits - and exhaled. Bev was looking out the window and Richie had taken up peeling a thin remainder of black fingernail polish from his pinky.

"So," she said after a moment, looking at him now. "Should I clarify for you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, that'd be neat."

She chuckled and flicked the filter end with her thumbnail. "You say you're falling in love, but honey, you've been in love with that boy since we were 19."

Richie pinched his face up and took a drag. "What are you talking about?"

Beverly took a deep breath like she was about to scream for a millennium. "Damn Rich, you don't even recognize it do you? Okay, look, so you remember right after Ed's birthday that year we threw that party, right? And Eddie brought this guy he was seeing, what was his fucking name? Something with a T-

"Trevor."

"Right, Trevor. And they got into this huge fight at the party and Trevor fucking stormed out or whatever and Eddie was crying the whole night because Trevor was his first real boyfriend. Real anything."

"Yeah, what does that have to do with anything though?"



Beverly put her hand on his bouncing knee, immediately stopping its movement. "Rich, I've never seen you act like that with anyone else. You carried him to his room, tucked him into bed, fucking brought him water and shit. Like, we all just sat around too drunk to do much but you sobered up like that." She snapped her fingers.

He sighed. "That doesn't mean I was in love with him, Bev."

She raised a finger. "That's not all of it. You held him, listening to everything he had to say, and this look you had in your eyes." She paused. "Rich it was like he was the moon and you were seeing sky for the first time."

He listened and pondered this for a moment. "Okay?"

"Richie," she chuckled, pressing her back against the windowsill. "When was the last time you were with anyone, romantically or otherwise?"

He thought about it for a moment, taking a few hits off his cigarette. Well, there was Will back in, no they never more than kissed... what about Roxy, no she'd barely held his hand... David had...no... not him. Jesus... when was the last time he got laid?

He sighed and shrugged, to which she nodded. "Exactly. You haven't slept with or dated anyone since that night. And that was nearly five years ago. And you have always been affectionate with him -"

"Oh please, I'm affectionate with you and Stan!"

Beverly gave him a look, pursed lips, cocked head, the works. "I have never seen you kiss Stan on the neck or had you whisper in my ear the way you do with Eddie."

Richie blushed. He fiddled with the paper on the end of the cigarette and sighed. His glasses were fogging up on his nose and his face was heating up. Was he really so blind to it all?

"So," he said.

Beverly placed her hand on his knee, stroking the denim of his jeans with her thumb. "So."

They sat in silence for another moment, listening to the far away sounds of cars on Kansas Street and a lawnmower as someone pushed it across their unbridled yard.

"What do I do, Bev?" Richie said, his voice nearly a whine. "He means the world to me. As a friend and..."

She smashed the lit end of the cigarette with her fingers, rolling it between them. "Do you want something to happen between you two?" She asked.

He sighed hard. "I don't want to ruin anything."

"But you are in love with him, Rich. I can see it. Ben can see it. Stan and me have discussed it -"

"You talked about it with Stan?" He cried, throwing his hands up.

"You guys are supposedly close and you haven't talked to him about it so he asked, yes! But it doesn't matter. Eddie may be the only one of us who hasn't noticed." Bev said.

Rich looked out the window and sighed. "What if he doesn't want me?"

Bev shrugged sadly. "Then I guess nothing happens. Do you want to try to be with him?"

He thought about it. Did he want to be with him? Yes. He wanted to see what it felt like to finally press his mouth down into Eddie's, something he had probably wanted to do since they were teenagers. He wanted to know what it felt like to tangle his hands up in his hair instead of just messing it up. He wanted to know what he tasted like, what it felt like to wake up next to him, his own body curled around Eddie's smaller one. He wanted to hold his hand and take him to dinner and go see Eddie's neurotic mother as his boyfriend, his boyfriend, not just his loudmouth asshole best friend. He wanted all of it.

But he would never forgive himself if something happened. If he didn't actually make him happy. If he took something too far one day and said something and Eddie realized he would never change, he

would always be Trashmouth Tozier, the kid with greasy hair and broken glasses and too much to say. He didn't want to break Eddie's heart. He didn't want Eddie to break his heart. And he didn't want to lose their friendship. He loved him, had loved him since they had first become friends nearly 15 years ago, and even if he didn't want to admit it to himself yet he was in love with him as well. Maybe that meant he should stay away.

"I don't...want to ruin anything." Richie repeated.

Beverly sighed and took his hands in hers. She searched his eyes behind glass and chewed her bottom lip. "Then I guess you don't do anything."

With that, Richie felt tears begin to rise behind his eyes. He put a hand over his mouth to try and hush them, but they came anyway. Quiet, fat tears ran down his cheeks, his body shaking with each silenced sob, and Beverly took his head into her chest, holding him as he cried.

Bill burst into the kitchen, phone in hand and panting, a huge smile taking over his whole face. Richie was laying out over two chairs, his feet propped up onto Mike's lap, Stan and Eddie on his other side eating sandwiches. Beverly sat on the counter, one of her bare legs pulled up and the other swinging back and forth into the cabinet, a steady thump-thump-thump. Ben was fiddling with the lock on the backdoor, trying to tighten it in its socket.

They all looked at him when he came in, waiting. He held his phone aloft and exhaled hard, trying to catch his breath. "Audra's coming!" He said.

Beverly lit up. "Right now?"

Bill shook his head and patted his chest. "This weekend. We have the day off at the high school and she's going to skip class and come up for the weekend. So, yeah."

"So we should celebrate!" Mike said, looking over at Stan. He nodded.

"Absolutely!" Stan said, setting down his sandwich and dusting his

fingers off over the plate.

Richie perked up a little. He could use some celebrating. It'd been two weeks since the conversation in Beverly's room and he didn't feel different or better. He could feel himself still pining, watching Eddie whenever they were together. His heart would race whenever he saw him around the house, or his name appeared in the group chat, or even when he could hear his voice in a different room. At one point Mike was talking to Ben and just said the word 'ready' and he had stopped on a dime and nearly tripped over his own feet to hear what they were talking about.

He was falling head over heels for Eddie and there was nothing he could do to stop it it seemed. And it was making things harder in general. He and Eddie and Ben and Stan were watching a movie last Tuesday and Eddie had his phone out the entire time, the small screen lighting up his face. Richie watched with a growing anger filling the pit of his stomach, wondering who he could possibly be texting. He tried to justify it to himself even, thinking no, it has nothing to do with how I feel about him, I'm just trying to enjoy the movie and he's got to be that guy who has his phone out through the entirety of the film. But so did Stan and Richie didn't even give him a passing glance. It was Eddie. And the fact that he could have been texting someone else.

Richie had never considered himself a jealous person, he was usually the type who would let you leave if you wanted - if you didn't want him so be it. And he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out why Eddie was having this effect on him. They'd known each other forever, and yeah, sure, Richie probably liked him more than any other person he'd ever liked. Er, well loved. That word frightened him.

Love? How could he love Eddie? He'd never loved anyone before so how could he know if that was what he was feeling. But these were all excuses. Richie was in love with him, and it was only getting worse.

He sat up in his seat and tried not to look directly at him, but he was there in the corner of his eye anyway, eating the meat that had fallen out of his sandwich with his fingers. He pressed one of them into his

mouth and let it linger there and Richie felt a dull ache in his pants. God he had it bad.

"What should we go do?" Mike asked, pressing the tops of Richie's shoes absently.

"She'll be here Thursday around 8. Her last class gets done at like 2." Bill said.

Beverly held up a finger and slapped her hand on her leg. "It's fucking karaoke Thursday! We should go to karaoke!" She looked at Stan and Mike, who were agreeing enthusiastically.

"Yes karaoke, oh my god, it's been a minute!" Stan said.

Richie looked from Bev to Stan to Eddie, trying to play off the fact that he only wanted to look at Eddie. "Who all's going?" He asked.

Stan, Beverly, Ben, Bill, and Mike raised their hands, but Eddie hesitated for a moment and Richie felt his heart sink underneath his ribs.

"I'm down," he finally said and Richie tried to hide a smile. He caught Beverly's eye.

She was frowning slightly at him, but it wasn't a look of disappointment, just...sadness. Worry.

The others were talking but he couldn't break his gaze with her. And every second that passed, he was starting to get more nervous. It was like she was saying a hundred things by just staring at him. Don't get too excited. Don't get your hopes up. Don't do anything rash. Unless you want to. If you do then go for it. But be careful. I love you. I want you to be happy. Be careful be careful be careful.

It took a moment for Richie to pull his eyes away from her's and by then Eddie, Ben, and Bill had left the room, discussing loudly the semantics of Thursday evening. Mike and Stan were whispering amongst each other and Beverly nodded towards the door. Richie pulled his legs carefully from Mike's lap, who looked at him briefly, and they went outside.

As soon as Beverly put the cigarette in between his fingers, he started pacing, the sun starting to fall behind the house. He stuck it in his teeth but didn't light it, Beverly setting the end of her own on fire. She let him pace for a moment, his feet running a track in the grass just off the patio square and she rolled the filter slowly between her fingers.

He was trying to find the words, a distant echoing of all the things they had said to one another in the bedroom ricocheting around his brain. She had seen the remnants of excitement on his face, she knew what he was thinking. But she wanted to hear it. It was that Eddie would be there. Eddie. Eddie Eddie Eddie Eddie Eddie. Jesus Christ what was wrong with him it's only Eddie!

"What are you thinking, Rich?" Beverly's voice cut through his stream of consciousness, and he looked at her. She was squinting at him, waiting. Her cigarette burned dully in her hand.

He shook his head; he didn't know for sure yet.

"Richie," she drew his name out on her tongue.

He didn't stop pacing, but all of the words came at once. "Ya know, I thought I could do it. Be okay. Pretend I didn't want him. Leave him be. Just like... I dunno, fuck around elsewhere, maybe try and play it cool and just like keep doing me or whatever but I can't even think straight? Like, I can't even make my stupid fucking jokes anymore or flirt no holds bar anymore? But every time I see him I feel sick? Like my stomach hurts? And-and-and I want to kiss him? All the time! All the time, Bev, it's fucking gross! And sometimes I wonder what he's doing when we're not around each other? And like, I dream about him? And I want him to go to karaoke and I thought if he didn't go I honestly wouldn't go, Bev I legitimately thought about skipping the bar because Eds might not go! And it's ridiculous because why now? Like, straight the fuck up why now? Why couldn't all this shit happen in high school? So I could make the mistake and move on? Why does it have to be now? And-and-and like, why the fuck am I so jealous, all of a sudden? Seriously, Bev, it's ridiculous like he was on the phone with his mom, his goddamn mother the other day and I nearly lost my shit it's gross. I don't want to be that guy who gets caught up and like fucking locks him away because that's fucking gross and I

want him to have the world. Like give that boy the goddamn world because he deserves it, ya know? And I can't fucking give that to him, Bev, I can't give it to him and it kills me, it fucking kills me and I need you to tell me what to do." He finally stopped, panting, his cigarette still unlit.

She laughed. "Butterflies."

He coughed. "What?"

"That sick feeling," she pointed at him with the smoke. "It's butterflies."

He screwed his face up. "Well butterflies are fucking gross and I don't want 'em."

She chuckled. "You're pretty fucking gross sometimes, Trashmouth."

"Well, regardless, I don't need them. I can't eat anything because of it and I'm fucking hungry as shit." He ran a hand through his hair and extended the other one shaking. She pressed the lighter into it. He used it and inhaled deeply, the smoke hitting his lungs like cool water.

"I can't tell you what to do Rich. Just like you couldn't tell me what to do with Ben." She said.

"Bev, what if I do something stupid?" He asked, his voice wavering.

She shrugged and sighed. "Like specifically or generally?"

He waved his hands around, cigarette dangling from his lips. "I suppose in general."

"Are you drinking Thursday?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. Especially since he'll be there."

Beverly pursed her lips. "How bout this?" She sat down on the edge of the planter at the corner of the patio and tucked one of her legs over the other, bare feet pale like milk under the lavender and rouge of the sky. "If ever - ever - you feel like you're going to do something

stupid, say something you shouldn't or you feel scared, just say you want to go like... I dunno, powder your nose or some shit."

Richie started pacing again. "What, like cocaine?"

Beverly rolled her eyes. "No, idiot, it's what girls sometimes say when they want to talk shit in the bathroom."

"I have never in my life heard you or any other woman say that." Richie said, taking another deep hit from the cigarette. It tasted strange to him and he wondered if maybe it was a Pall Mall.

"Regardless, Richard, say something like that and we will go take a smoke break. Give you time away to not do something you don't want." She pulled her nearly-gone cigarette to her mouth and smiled mischievously. "Plus it sounds like a code."

Richie finally stopped, facing east. "Why wouldn't I just say I'm taking a smoke break?"

Bev waved her hands. "It doesn't matter what you say, it's just to get you out of the situation. The code be damned!" She sounded frustrated, but she was laughing.

Richie sighed and turned to face her. "You promise you won't let me do anything stupid?"

She crushed the filter in the flowerpot, brushing the dirt from her hands and exhaling a line of grey smoke over her head. She held out a crooked pinky, the black fingernail polish on it chipping away at the edges. He linked it with his own, his throat tingling a little. He swallowed hard and held her gaze.

"I promise. No matter what you choose, I promise I won't let you do anything too stupid."

He rolled his eyes, and pulled his hand away. "Clarification of 'too stupid'; appreciate it."

Beverly shrugged and rubbed his shoulder. "I can only do so much."

He sighed and looked up at the house. He knew somewhere inside,



Eddie was milling about, perhaps smiling loudly and making plans, no idea that his best friend was just outside, wishing he could tell him how in love with him he was.

When Audra arrived, the seven of them were all stood in the living room. Bill was panicking, Beverly and Stan fixing his hair and straightening his clothes and telling him over and over again, "You look great. You're great, Bill. Jesus she already wants to make out with you, relax."

Richie was curled up on the window seat, glasses sliding down his face, a bottle of Pabst in his hands. He was bringing it to his lips every few seconds and this was already his third one. He started feeling nervous about noon when Eddie came to his door to ask if he was drinking tonight.

He had practically jumped out of his skin when Eds rapped on the open door and tried to brush it off by leaning casually against the wall.

Eddie grimaced at him. "Uh, you cool?"

He tried to swallow but found it difficult. "Yeah, yeah, fine. Just fine, I'm great, great yeah - how are you? What's up?" God he felt like a fucking idiot.

Eddie came in the door fully and crossed his arms over his chest. "You drinking tonight? I'm just trying to see who can drive."

Richie made a raspberry with his lips. He couldn't bring himself to look directly at Eddie; he was afraid he'd notice he was blushing.

"Yeah, I mean, yeah, I'm gonna drink. Unless I shouldn't - why, are you drinking? Are you not drinking?" He glanced out the corner of his eye. Eddie was smirking at him. The blush grew deeper on his cheeks and he smiled at the floor.

"I planned on drinking, yeah. Bev said she could maybe drink one and then drive us. Stan might not drink either. You're welcome to drink, Richie. But only if you make me a promise."

Richie looked up, his eyes swimming with hopefulness. "Oh yeah?"

He stood up straight. "What's that?"

Eddie leaned against the door jamb. "Promise you'll buy me a drink."

He practically melted, like ice cream all over the hand of a five-year-old kid on a midsummer day. It took him a moment to choke out his answer. "Y-yeah. Absolutely. A gin and tonic, I assume?"

Eddie scoffed, and he was already turning to leave the room. "You know me pretty well there, Rich."

And now he was two and half almost three beers in, freaking out. He had originally thought, if he could get the perfect amount of tipsy - not too sober, not too drunk - he might be brave enough to tell Eddie. Maybe pull him aside at the bar and tell him how he felt. Maybe finally press their faces together until their teeth crashed and pick him up and put him against a wall. Something slutty - but only if Eddie wanted it. All of that initial courage was out the window, dying on the grass outside the house. He was afraid. What if Eddie already had a boyfriend? Shit what if he didn't like Richie like that at all? There were times where Eddie flirted back, but that was when they were teenagers. It was always a joke, never serious. He couldn't get a read on him.

Eddie was sitting on the couch next to Mike and they were watching as Bill was primped and preened in the center of the living room. Richie couldn't take his eyes off of him. He looked so handsome - a word he never used - tonight. A plain white t-shirt and jeans, his hair was messy today, the curls falling haphazardly in his face. And his face, tan and freckled, was bright with laughter and he leaned into Mike a little. Richie felt that now all-too familiar pang of jealousy and he took another swig of beer. He was starting to feel it all, the drunkenness burning slowly along the skin of his arms and in his chest. He shouldn't be jealous of Mike; he was his best friend. They all were.

When Audra's rental car finally pulled up in front of the house, its lights hitting the window in a blinding beam that caught the lenses of Richie's glasses, it was half past nine. Bill practically froze in place, his chest heaving.

"She's here," Stan said and pushed Bill towards the door. It took a second but then his feet started moving, the others going to the door with him. Richie stayed put on the window seat, watching as they all got up from their places and followed Bill like a cloud. His eyes caught Eddie, behind Ben who had his hands on Beverly's waist. The way Eddie's hips moved as he walked made him want to jump up and put his hands there too, like Ben with Beverly, and press his lips to his neck.

But he didn't. He stayed glued to his seat, watching everything unfold from inside. Bill running outside and catching Audra up in his arms and planting a thousand thousand kisses on her. Beverly, Ben, and Mike next giving her hugs as she came up the sidewalk, Bill behind her with her small red suitcase, Eddie and Stan giving her a hug at the same time. It was as she came in the door, wearing black leggings and a thin grey crop top with her hair half in a bun on top of her head and half down, that Richie got up, setting down his beer and hiding behind the short wall that cut the living room from the foyer. When she pulled out into the doorway, saying, "Well where is he?", he popped out from behind the corner, growling.

"I gotcha!" He said and she turned in his arms, smiling up at him.

"Hey Richie," she said into his chest.

It was madness to him that they'd all become so close with Audra in the few short months they'd known her. She wasn't a Loser by any means - they'd made their group long before she came along - but that didn't make her any less family.

"What took you so long? You were supposed to be here at eight I thought." He said as the others crowded in around him. Bill came up and placed his hand on the small of her back, beaming at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Traffic out of Bangor was insane. I'm surprised I made it this quickly." She said.

"I'm just glad you made it safe." Bill said. She pressed into him and he kissed the top of her head.

"So we ready to go?" Mike asked. He was brushing against Stan's arm

with his fingers. Richie looked away rather quickly as if he were catching a glimpse of something strange and foreign, something he wasn't supposed to see. He focused back on Bill and Audra, who were still lost in each other's eyes.

"Takes about thirty minutes to get there with late night traffic, so by the time we get there things'll start getting busy, probably." Beverly followed up. Bill turned away and breathed in like he was gasping for air.

"Yes, absolutely, let's do it. I'll drive and you?" He said pointing between Bev and Stan. They both nodded.

"Bev can drive there and I'll drive back if she drinks too much." Stan said.

"Perfect!" Audra said, clapping her hands together. "Let me just run and clean myself up real quick and we'll go."

"Gotta powder your nose?" Richie asked, tossing Beverly a smartass smile.

"What?" Audra asked, her tiny nose pinching up.

Richie waved a hand at her. "Ignore me, everyone else does."

She shook her head and Bill led her to the bathroom behind the kitchen.

They left about ten minutes later, piling into Audra's rental and Bev's jeep. Bill jumped shotgun in the rental, Stan and Mike pressed in behind them. Ben, Richie, and Eddie got into the jeep, Richie letting the middle seat go untaken. Eddie looked at him as he clicked his seatbelt into place, eyebrow raised.

But he didn't want to sit too close. Suddenly it felt too suspicious, even though he had done it a hundred times. He kept drumming his fingers against his bouncing legs.

When they arrived there was a bit of a line but Beverly wasn't worried. "They won't make us pay the cover." She said matter-of-factly.

And indeed it was so. Beverly came up first, Ben immediately behind her. She pointed at the others, counting out the eight of them to the bouncer, a burly white man with a ginger beard and a septum ring matching her's, and everything they said to one another was drowned out by the music blaring out the open door. The bouncer said something to Bev close to her ear and she laughed and stuck her tongue out. The bearded man waved them past, shaking Ben's hand as he did so, and the eight of them streamed past the line of disgruntled guests waiting to get in.

The bar was crowded, its concrete floors filled with college types and sticky with spilled beer. Richie saw the bartop in the far right corner, past the stage where a man dressed in flannel and cowboy boots was singing a tone deaf rendition of Friends in Low Places and he pushed past the others towards it. Eddie had been watching him the entire car ride and he needed something to calm his nerves.

He came up to an empty space between a blonde sorority girl and a frat boy talking to one of his brothers. The bartenders were running back and forth getting beers and pouring liquor into clear plastic cups. He felt a hand on his back and he turned, flinching a little. It was Eddie, but the others were behind him.

"Are you okay, Richie? You've been real jumpy lately." His eyes were concerned and looking down into them made Richie's heart leap.

"Of course I'm okay, Eds. I just haven't been getting much sleep lately from all the late night sex calls with your mom." He smiled wryly.

"Beep beep, Rich." Eddie replied, shoving him playfully on the arm. The touch made his stomach flip.

"Hey!" Beverly said. Richie hesitantly looked away from Eddie and caught her eye. "Mike had a great idea! We're all going to choose each other's song tonight."

Richie glared at Mike who was laughing and rubbing his hands together like a maniacal super villain. "Who's picking whose?" He asked.

Mike pointed at each of them as he talked, his voice raised above the

bass and voices of the other bar goers. "You'll pick Eddie's, Eddie will pick Bill's, Bill will pick Ben's, Ben will pick Audra's, Audra will pick Stan's, Stan's got mine, I got Bev's and she'll get yours. Sound easy enough?"

Richie pretended to count something out on his fingers. Eddie hit him in the chest gently with the back of his hand and he laughed. "Yeah, got it. Just remember who you're picking and it's easy-peasy."

Eddie jabbed a finger into his black shirt. "Don't pick anything stupid, Trashmouth. I don't want to be singing anything filthy."

A wicked grin took over Richie's face. "Eddie I promise I will pick something fantastically naughty, the perfect song you can write home to mom about."

Ben laughed over Bev's shoulder. "Something slutty?"

Richie pointed a finger gun at him. "Boy-o, Haystack, you got it on point."

Eddie rolled his eyes, but he was smiling too.

Rich ordered the first round of drinks for everyone except Stan, who ordered a Coke, and they all rushed up to the booth to pick out their songs. The karaoke selection book was filled with songs ranging from the classics to newer stuff, the pages warped and bent from years of being turned and spilled on, but they all found what they were looking for. Stan was cackling and pointing to a Backstreet Boys song - "We have to sing that as a group please!" - and Beverly saw what she wanted and scribbled it down on her slip, her right hand hiding it away from Richie's prying eyes. He already knew what he wanted Eddie to sing and he used the shorter boy's back to write it down in his spiraling hand as soon as he grabbed up a slip and pen.

"It better not be something stupid, Rich, I swear to god."

"No promises, Spaghetti."

Mike and Stan were whispering and pointing over Bill and Audra's shoulders at the book, discussing the song choices. Once they all got their slips handed in, Richie had already finished his first beer. Stan

followed him to the bar to top off his own drink. When the bartender nodded at Richie, he held up two fingers and the girl nodded, reaching below to grab two more beers, popping the caps off of both of them. He handed her a crumpled twenty dollar bill and waved her hand to signify to keep the change. He took them both up in his hands and started with the first, downing half of it in one fell swoop. Stan watched him and fiddled with the straw in his own drink.

"You okay, Richie?" He asked, his voice cutting through the sound. He glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, a little beer dribbling out the corner of his mouth. He used the back of his hand to wipe it away.

"Yeah, why?" He was starting to feel more drunk, nearly five in, his inhibitions significantly lower than they were earlier today.

Stan shrugged. "I dunno man, you just seem far away tonight."

Richie was watching Eddie talk to Ben, only half paying attention. "I'm no farther away than normal."

"You know you can talk to me, right?" Stan's voice was gentle.

Richie turned on him, beer sloshing around in his stomach. "You know you can talk to me right, Stan?"

Stan fell back a bit, his eyes going quickly to Mike, who was talking to Audra. He blushed deeply and looked at his drink. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"What is that they say in Stranger Things? 'Friends don't lie.'" Richie wasn't angry, but his voice had a bite to it.

"I have nothing to lie about." Stan said.

Richie smirked at him, but it wasn't a real smile. He watched Mike for a second and then turned his eyes to Eddie. "I'll start talking to you when you start talking to me." With that he walked away to join the rest of the group, leaving Stan at the bar open mouthed.

If something was going on with Stan and Mike, why wouldn't he tell him, Richie wondered. Didn't they tell each other everything? But as

he came up next to Eddie, whose name was being called by the sound booth guy, he knew that wasn't true. And that made him sad.

Eddie took the stage, pulling the mic stand down to his level and watching the screen above his head to see what he was singing. He waved to the others, who had all pulled up directly in front of the stage and they whooped and hollered.

Richie was staring hard at him, waiting. When the name presumably came up on the television, Eddie glared down at him, the microphone wire wrapped around his hand. He pulled it to his mouth and said, "Fuck you, Tozier." But he was smiling huge.

The others were laughing and raising their drinks up as Eddie started The Bad Touch by Bloodhound Gang. He did pretty damn well and Richie finished one of his drinks while watching, smiling and singing along slightly. When he was finished they all cheered, some others in the bar doing so as well. Eddie came off the stage and took his gin and tonic from Bill, who clapped him on the back.

Next went Stan, Audra had picked out a Twenty One Pilots number for him perfectly enough. Then Bill went, singing a lovely - Audra's words - rendition of Don't You Want Me by The Human League. He was blushing like crazy the whole time, pointing at Audra while he sang, who covered her face embarrassed. When he came down offstage, someone new was called up and the group took it as the perfect opportunity to to refill their drinks and for Beverly and Richie to grab a cigarette. By now, Richie had finished his seventh or eighth, he couldn't be quite sure, beer and was working on the next, his feet working on autopilot. Beverly grabbed his arm as he tripped slightly over the rise separating the inside from the smoke porch.

"Jesus, babes, you good?" She said, her drink spilling a little as she caught him. He brushed her off and took a sip of his own. He wasn't okay but he was going to keep pretending he was. Eddie just looked so fucking good. He had passed the not too drunk not too sober section of the evening he had been hoping to utilize and had headed straight on to bordering on sloppy. He had lost his chance. Might as well enjoy himself.

"Yeah I'm great! Stan's probably mad at me, Eddie looks hot as shit,



and I'm having a good time regardless. Not sure what's going on with me." He lit his cigarette shakily and let the smoke hit his head, cooling the thin sheen of sweat that had beaded up there.

She rubbed his arm. "I doubt Stan is mad at you. But maybe you should slow down on the drinks. I think you're coming up next."

He nodded and pulled out his phone to look at the time. Somehow two hours had passed and it was coming up on 12:45.

He exhaled and flipped his hair away from his glasses. "What song did you pick?"

She smiled and shook her head. "That's for me to know and you to find out, Richard my boy."

They finished their cigarettes and went back inside. Eddie came up to him and took him carefully by the arm. "Ready to buy me that drink?" Richie felt the burning in his cheeks and all he could do was nod. Eddie took his hand - fire on fire on fire - and pulled him to the bar. The bartender recognized Richie at this point and pulled out his beer before he could even say what he wanted. Eddie raised his eyebrow at him and told the girl, "Gin and tonic, please," leaning over the bar a little. Richie watched the curve of his back and for a split second he wondered what it looked like naked. He shook the thought out of his mind and gave the bartender another twenty. He hadn't remembered bringing so much cash but here he was with plenty of money.

"Thank you," Eddie said. "But I'm still mad at you for that song."

Richie rolled his eyes. "Please, you fucking killed it and you know you got all the fellas hot and bothered."

It was Eddie's turn to roll his eyes. "I doubt I impressed anyone in particular."

Richie let his hand brush up against his arm. "You impressed me." His voice was quiet and he was surprised that he actually heard him. He looked up at him under heavy eyelashes.

"Up next is Richie Tozier, singing a "secret" song chosen by his BFF,

Beaver-ly." The DJ said over the loud speakers. Richie looked up at the stage where the others were standing, waving him over. He was panting a little and looked back at Eddie. Maybe he could do it after all.

"Stay here, I'll come back right after I'm done."

"Okay." Eddie was smiling, such a huge bright smile. Goddamn.

Richie rushed up to the stage, his heart pounding. He pushed through them all, Beverly and Ben at the front, flanked by Mike and Stan and then Audra with Bill's arm wrapped around her waist. Richie set his beer down on the stool they provided and pushed his glasses up on his nose. He was nervous - which was weird to him because he'd sang on stage a million times. But he knew what it was, deep down. It was because Eddie was watching.

The screen blared blue with a pixelated logo of a bird above him and then the title appeared and music started pumping out the speakers. Ballroom Blitz by Sweet. He laughed and cocked his head at Beverly. "You beautiful bitch!" He said to her and she shrugged, already beginning to tap her feet to the beat.

He wrapped the cord around his hand and nodded to the beat.

He pointed at them each as he called them. "Are you ready, Stan?" Stan nodded. "Eddie?" He winked at him and Eddie waved. "Mike?" Mike mouthed the response, "Okay!"

"Alright fellas, let's go!" He was already in his element, Brian Connolly incarnate onstage.

The others were screaming, clapping and cheering for him just below the stage.

He flipped his hair out of his eyes again and brought the mic to his mouth, his lips pressing too closely to the rough head.

"Oh it's been getting so hard," he grabbed his crotch. "Living with the things you do to me." He threw his head back and laughed.

"My dreams are getting so strange, I'd like to tell you everything I

see."

He pointed to Eddie sitting on the barstool, nodding along with his singing. "Oh, I see a man in the back, as a matter of fact and his eyes are as red as a sun," he pointed next at Audra, who pulled her hand to her chest and laughed. "And a girl in the corner, let no one ignore her 'cause she thinks she's the passionate one! Oh, yeah!"

He was sweating, his hair starting to stick to his forehead and he was filling with excitement.

"It was like lightening, everybody was frightening, and the music was soothing, and they all started grooving! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!" He threw his head back, leaning backwards as he pulled the mic above him, his voice hitting an almost ridiculous high pitch. He turned back down to face his friends, who were singing along.

"And the man in the back said 'Everyone attack!' And it turned into a ballroom blitz! And the girl in the corner said, 'Boy I wanna warn ya, it'll turn into a ballroom blitz!' Ballroom blitz! Ballroom blitz!"

He looked up and searched the bar for Eddie again, having suddenly lost him. But when he found him, his chest seized up. Someone was talking to him, a guy. A tall blond guy who was leaning on the bar and Eddie was smiling up at him, his drink sitting coldly in his hand. A low growl filled Richie's chest, a hollow sinking feeling much like embarrassment and anger had smashed together. The raging green monster.

"Ballroom blitz..." but he couldn't sing the next line. The backup singers on the tape did it for him - "...ballroom blitz..." - and Beverly followed his line of sight to the bar, worry taking over her face.

As the chorus ended, Richie took a hard drink of his beer, spilling some of it on his shirt and he unwrapped the microphone from his hand and set it in the stand, not taking his eyes from Eddie. It was a dead end stare, and for a moment the rest of the bar faded away, and all he could see was this fucking guy - this fucking asshole - talking to Eddie, leaning in closer and closer.

"Oh, reaching out for something, touching nothing's all I ever do,"

maybe if he closed his eyes he wouldn't see it, wouldn't think about it, "Oh, I softly call you over, when you appear there's nothing left of you. Uh-huh," but there they were, still talking, still so fucking close, he looked at Beverly, his arms outstretched, "Now the man in the back is ready to crack as he raises his hands to the sky, and the girl in the corner is everyone's mourner she could kill you with a wink of her eye," he winked at her and she tried to smile but she knew, oh she knew.

"Oh, yeah, it was electric," The guy had his mouth pressed right up against Eddie's ear, "So frantically hectic," Eddie was smiling and giggling, "And the band started leaving," the guy - this fucking guy - put his hand on Eddie's leg, "'Cause they all stopped breathing! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!" He felt like he was going to vomit right there on stage, the overhead lights and flashing strobes suddenly too much but this guy, goddammit this fucking guy. Just push it down, Richie, just leave it alone.

"And the man in the back said, 'Everyone attack!' And it turned into a ballroom blitz! And the girl in the corner said, 'Boy I wanna warn ya it'll turn into a ballroom blitz!' Ballroom blitz!"

He opened his eyes and looked and that was it. This guy's hand was sliding up Eddie's thigh now, and Richie felt his feet hit the concrete floor. He was walking towards them.

"Richie where are you going?" He heard Beverly cry.

"I'm taking a powder!" He replied, suddenly the code going right out the window. He couldn't stop watching them, but Bev was right behind him, trying to grab his arm.

"You're in the middle of a song -"

"Finish it for me!" He pushed past some jock types who were chattering on loudly but in a language he didn't seem to recognize. The music was still playing overhead - the DJ hadn't noticed he'd left the stage.

As he came up on them Eddie's face fell a little - disappointment.

"Hey!" Richie said, not to him but the guy, who pulled his hand back, a Bud Light bottle in his right hand.

"Richie, hey -" Eddie's voice was quiet but Richie wasn't listening. He could feel the steam curling out of his ears.

"You're talking to my fucking boyfriend." Richie said, his nose reaching the guy's forehead and he didn't know why he'd said that, boyfriend. He wasn't speaking for himself anymore it seemed.

"Boyfriend?" Eddie said.

"Your fucking boyfriend, eh?" The guy's voice was so fucking grating it made Richie's teeth grind together.

"Yeah, so I'd appreciate it if you keep your fucking hands off of him." He tried to press himself defensively into Eddie's legs, but he lost his balance a little.

The guy laughed and wrapped his arm around Eddie - who looked suddenly lost in confusion. "Well me and your boyfriend were just talking about him coming over to my place. So later on tonight, when he's sucking my cock, I hope you're thinking real hard about who your fucking boyfriend is." His face was so smug, Richie could feel his hand curl into a fist. Eddie was saying something like, "Hey," or "What the fuck," but it was all white noise.

He laughed himself. "You better watch your fucking mouth or I'm gonna put you in the hospital." He could hear, dimly, the swell of the next chorus coming. He felt someone come up beside him, Mike or Ben maybe.

The guy stood stock still. "You ain't gonna do fucking shit." He raised his eyebrows. An invitation.

Richie laughed and wiped the corners of his mouth. And then it happened. It was like slow motion for a second.

He pulled his fist back, and socked the guy right in the nose. It was a crooked punch but it connected well enough, blood pouring from his nostrils. He heard his name called, "Richie!" Beverly's voice.

The guy stumbled back, dropping his beer and it shattered on the floor. He was laughing a little and looking at the black-red blood on his hand. Music still boomed overhead. Richie was shaking. Suddenly there were six other guys behind him, all varying sizes and shapes, patting their friend on the back, faces angry and concerned. And then the guy came back, giving Richie a quick right fist to the jaw.

Then all hell broke loose. One of the friends grabbed Ben, who had appeared at Richie's side, Mike was pushing a guy twice his size - somehow - and ripping another off of Eddie, who had started throwing punches at the guy on top of Richie. Bill had pushed Audra back, and he and Stan were in the thick of it, hitting and swinging at one of the guy's friends. Beverly was in there too, hitting some dude who had taken the time to kick Richie while he was down, each blow knocking every ounce of air from his lungs. He could feel broken glass and foamy beer soaking his shirt, cutting up his skin. The guy was on top of him, leaning all of his weight on his chest, swinging and connecting every fucking time, but Rich was getting some good licks in too. He was fairly certain he had knocked one of the guy's teeth out because now his mouth was coursing blood, as was Richie's. He had bit his tongue pretty hard. Suddenly, someone was lifting the blond off of him, and he got in once last kick to the groin and he was too peeled off the floor. Stan.

"Let's go! Richie let's go they're gonna call the cops!" Stan was right in his face and he kept lunging to get past him, to get in one last hit before he'd call it quits. Eddie grabbed his arm and started pulling him, out past the bar to the back door, and the eight of them spilled into the alley.

Audra was curled up against Bill, trembling. Ben was checking over Beverly, a small cut on her left cheek, and she brushed him off, pulling a cigarette from her pocket with shaking hands and pushing it to her mouth. Mike and Stan were pressing their hands into each other's arms, assessing any damage. Richie was bent over, clutching his ribs where the guy had kicked him repeatedly. It would definitely bruise.

"What the fuck was that, Richie?" Eddie screamed, pushing against his chest with such a force that it caught him off guard and he nearly stumbled to the ground. He spit a mouthful of blood on the asphalt

and pulled his glasses off, well, one half of his glasses off, they had snapped in two and the left side was missing.

"What are you talking about?" He replied, running his split tongue over his teeth, counting them. All accounted for, thank god. He was mentally checking Eddie over for any cuts or bruises. His hair was more messed than normal, and aside from a small cut on his lip, he looked fine, though there was a splattering of blood across the chest of his white shirt. Richie had a feeling it was his.

"I'm talking about that! What the fuck did you do that for?" His voice was raised over the din of the city streets and the pulsating music from inside. They had continued like nothing happened.

Richie shook his head, swallowing a mouthful of blood. He could feel it oozing out the corner of his mouth and he wiped it away. He was trying to think of a way - any way - to put it. His mind was swimming and warping.

"Nothing, I just didn't like the way that guy was touching you." He was starting to come down, the adrenaline dissipating.

Eddie scoffed. "I can handle myself, thank you very much. And what does it matter if he was touching me?"

"Did you hear the shit he was saying about you?" Richie said, his voice going up a little. He didn't want to yell at him. He didn't want to yell at him he didn't want to.

"Richie you say stuff to me like that all the time!" Eddie came back. Mike came up and put a hand on his shoulder and Eddie shoved him off.

Richie was smiling, teeth red, and shaking his head. "Naw, I've never been nasty like that to you. Everything I've said has been a fucking joke."

Eddie sighed and threw his hands in the air, defeated. "Why does it even matter that he was touching me, Richie."

Suddenly the air was heavy and far away there was the ringing of police sirens. Richie opened his mouth to speak, to say a thousand

things but he couldn't. Instead he only replied, in a quiet voice. "I just know you don't like strangers touching you."

Eddie took a step toward him. It was cautious and his face was soft and caring again. "Richie," He said, reaching out to touch his arm. "That sort of thing hasn't bothered me for a while."

He pulled away. "I'm sorry, Eddie." The sirens were closer. He looked up to catch reflecting blue and red lights bouncing off the brick building at the end of the alley.

Beverly came up and put a hand on his shoulder tentatively. "Rich, call a cab. Get out of here. We'll handle this."

He turned to her and she smiled sweetly at him. Ben behind her nodded. "Don't worry man, we got you."

Richie nodded too and turned to stalk the opposite direction of the police. Eddie grabbed his arm with gentle fingertips.

"No, Richie, I'll come with you, please." His voice was small and Richie could feel pricks of tears coming up behind his eyes, one of which was starting to swell closed.

"No it's okay. I'm sorry, I just... I'm sorry." He couldn't look at him anymore. He turned to Beverly. "I'll see you at home."

Stan and Mike came up behind him again, slowly. "We'll go with you man." Mike said. Richie nodded and they started out the end of the alley again.

Richie wiped the blood and tears away from his eyes, throwing the remnants of his glasses into a pile of garbage out behind the bar. It was over, it was all over now. Everything he'd wanted was over now. And it was his own fucking fault. He was such a goddamn idiot.

"Richie!" He heard Eddie call, but he didn't turn. He just kept going, Mike and Stan's footsteps echoing behind his and they walked into the road, hailing a bright yellow taxi.